

First Record of Couch's Kingbird, *Tyrannus couchii*, in Maryland

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On 11 November 2014, while birding in Allegany County, we serendipitously found a Couch's Kingbird, *Tyrannus couchii*, west of Rocky Gap State Park, at a pond on Mason Road NE. This bird continued in the area for another two weeks and was seen, heard, and photographed by dozens of birders.

After spending much of the morning birding in other parts of Allegany County, we headed to Mason Road pond, arriving at 11:35 a.m. We had not even stopped the car before we observed a large *Myiarchus*-looking flycatcher atop one of the tall deciduous trees bordering the pond. We both scrambled to exit the car with our binoculars, scope, and a camera, and we observed the bird in astonishment for about 10 minutes. We discussed what we were seeing: a *Tyrannus* with a large gray head, darker mask, pale throat, and bright yellow coloring from under tail to breast. We noted the bird's forked tail, the lack of white outer webs to the outer tail feathers, and that its back appeared in the bright light to be grayish with maybe some green coloration. From our perspective, the bill looked quite large. The bird was very active, patrolling from treetop to treetop between deciduous and evergreen trees. Unfortunately, it did not vocalize.

The bird was still in view when we finally consulted our field guides. We had with us the Sibley (2000) and the National Geographic Society (Dunn et al. 2002) field guides. We first ruled out the most likely vagrant kingbird to occur in Maryland, the Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*). The tail of Western Kingbird has white outer webs on the feathers and lacks a fork, in contrast to the bird in question. In addition, the upper breast was not gray on the bird under direct observation. Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) also was ruled out because of the size of the bill (in a Cassin's the bill would have appeared relatively small) and the absence of a dark gray hood and breast. We were left with Couch's and Tropical (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) Kingbirds. We discussed the size and length of the bill; at the time we believed the bill to be large enough to identify the bird as a Tropical Kingbird. Furthermore, Tropical Kingbird is more prone to vagrancy, with many historical sightings in coastal states. We emailed, phoned, and texted other birders with the preliminary Tropical Kingbird identification. We watched the bird another 10 minutes or so, but then it flew out of sight.

Shortly afterward, Mikey Lutmerding, Tom Feild, and J.B. Churchill arrived on the scene, and after a few hours they relocated the bird. This time the bird did vocalize a single sharp “kip” call, and Mikey Lutmerding (2014) was able to record the bird’s call notes, and this recording, along with these observers’ view that the bird’s bill was not large enough to be a Tropical Kingbird, determined that this was actually a Couch’s Kingbird.

A photograph of the bird (Figure 1) was texted by Dave Czaplak to Tony Leukering (freelance ornithologist, Largo, Florida) who forwarded it to Peter Pyle (Staff Biologist, Institute for Bird Populations, Point Reyes Station, California). Pyle’s analysis (2014) of the spread primary feathers stated that it appeared P5 would be shorter than P10 on the unspread wing, another feature of Couch’s Kingbird, which is in the opposite configuration on Tropical Kingbird (Pyle 1997). Pyle also felt that the overall wing shape and bill size looked better for Couch’s Kingbird and he aged it as a first-fall bird, sex unknown but possibly a male based on the shape of the juvenile outer primary. This photograph (Figure 2), as well as additional ones taken by Czaplak (2014), Joel Martin, and others, showed that a distinct step would exist between primaries P5 and P6 on the unspread wing, another characteristic of Couch’s Kingbird (Traylor 1979). In subsequent days, additional photographs and observations became public, providing further confirmation of the identification of Couch’s Kingbird.

Couch’s Kingbird is accidental in the United States outside of southern Texas and the Gulf Coast (Dunn et al. 2002). Pete Dunne (2006) classifies it as a “2” on a scale of 0 (no vagrancy) to 4 (widespread) in his Vagrancy Index. A “2” is a species that shows “some modest pattern of vagrancy.” The Allegany County bird is the first record of Couch’s Kingbird in Maryland. It was seen consistently in the area where it was found from 11 November through 24 November 2014 and was accepted by the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) and placed on the Official List of the Birds of Maryland in March 2015 (MD/DCRC 2015).

The Maryland Couch’s Kingbird is only the third verified occurrence of this species east of the Mississippi River and outside the Gulf region (eBird 2015). The first record of Couch’s Kingbird outside its typical range, in the broad region north and east of Texas (north of the Gulf Coast and east of the Mississippi), was a one-day wonder on Plum Island in Essex County, Massachusetts on 7 September 2001. This sighting was accepted by the Massachusetts Record Committee in 2002 (Rines 2002).

The second record occurred in Michigan with a bird seen at Tawas Point State Park, Iosco County, from 26-28 May 2007. This bird was accepted by the Michigan Bird Records Committee in 2009 (Putnam 2010).



Figure 1: Couch's Kingbird. Giving the appearance that P5 would be shorter than P10 on the unspread primaries (white line extending from P10 through P6). Allegany County, Maryland, 11 November 2014. (Photographed by Dave Czaplak)



Figure 2: Couch's Kingbird. Giving the appearance that a distinct step (white bracket) would exist between P5 and P6 on the unspread primaries. Allegany County, Maryland, 11 November 2014. (Photographed by Dave Czaplak)

Additionally, there was a “thought to be” Couch’s Kingbird on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia, Canada, on 16 October 1997, but details were minimal (Mactavish 1998). In *All the Birds of Nova Scotia*, McLaren (2012) stated that several observers studied this bird on the late afternoon of 15 October and the early morning of 16 October. A distant, out-of focus photograph and descriptions of the bird’s appearance suggested Couch’s Kingbird. Two observers who heard its calls concluded that they matched Couch’s rather than Tropical Kingbird. In the introduction to his book, McLaren “makes it clear that such records are included only because they are plausible, not to ‘certify’ them, in the belief that other reviewers can make up their own minds from such published evidence” (McLaren, in litt., 23 September 2015).

While Tropical Kingbird has over 10 records in the same region, there are several birds that could not be conclusively identified beyond Tropical/Couch’s Kingbird. It is possible that some of these refer to Couch’s Kingbird (Mlodinow 1998, eBird 2015).

Addendum: About a month after the Couch’s Kingbird had stopped being seen in Maryland, a Couch’s Kingbird was reported and continued to be seen in the area of West Village, Manhattan, New York, New York, between 25 December 2014 and 9 January 2015 (eBird 2015).

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