

First Maryland Record of Pacific-slope/Cordilleran (“Western”) Flycatcher, *Empidonax difficilis/occidentalis*

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On 16 November 2015, I photographed an *Empidonax* flycatcher in southwestern Caroline County, Maryland. The bird caught my eye as I was birding along Poplar Neck Road at the edge of a scrubby field on the northeast side of the road. I had been playing a tape of Eastern Screech-Owl, *Megascops asio*, in order to attract the attention of passerines or other birds that might be in the area. At 11:55 a.m., out of the corner of my eye, I noted a bird actively flycatching in the small deciduous trees at the edge of the field about 50 ft (15 m) from where I was positioned. Although it is possible that the recording attracted the bird into the general area, it did not seem particularly interested in the sound from the tape. The bird was very active, perching on a branch then suddenly sallying out for an insect and flying back to the same perch or one nearby. Each time, when it first perched, the bird flicked its tail several times. It continued flycatching, sometimes landing in sight, but more often perching on branches that were out of my line of sight a few yards deeper inside the edge of trees and bushes. The bird seemed to do most of its foraging at about 3–5 ft (1–1.5 m) above the ground.

The bird was clearly an *Empidonax* (empid), based on its small size, olive upperparts, pale underparts, wing bars, and eye ring. Any empid is an unexpected species in late November in Maryland and is likely to be a rare species, or a very late-date breeding or migratory species. I noted that this bird had very bright yellow underparts, with a hint of olive on the upper breast, and a pale throat (Figure 1). The bird had a very prominent pale eye ring that was narrower at the top and bottom and extended out in a teardrop fashion at the rear. My photos did not capture the hint of a peak to the back of the head, which I saw through binoculars. Its wings were a sooty dark color with two light buff-colored wing-bars (Figure 2). I was never able to get a good sense of the relative length of the tail, but the primaries did not seem to extend to the base of the tail. The bird did not vocalize.

I made phone calls and sent texts with photos immediately, but unfortunately the bird was not seen again that day or in following days despite multiple efforts by other birders to re-find it. However, my description, photos, and the timing of



Figure 1. Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (“Western”) Flycatcher, *Empidonax difficilis/occidentalis*. Poplar Neck Road near Choptank, Caroline County, Maryland, 16 November 2015.



Figure 2. Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (“Western”) Flycatcher. Poplar Neck Road near Choptank, Caroline County, Maryland, 16 November 2015.

the bird's occurrence were sufficient to rule out Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*), the only other species with which this bird might have been confused. The Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is typically gone from Maryland by mid-October. The eye ring of the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is usually circular and more rounded behind the eye, not showing the distinct teardrop profile of the bird I saw. The coloration of the underparts of the bird on Poplar Neck Road was also much brighter yellow than would be expected on a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Regarding the bill, which did not appear especially wide, I noted that the upper mandible was dark and the lower was yellowish-orange. The bill seemed a bit longer than what I would have expected for a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, although Yellow-bellied does show a lot of variation in bill shape and size. Analysis of the secondaries (Figure 2) showed a buff-colored fringing pattern consistent with Pacific-slope/Cordilleran ("Western") Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis/occidentalis*) as compared to Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (Baumann et al. 2014). I submitted my photos and a written report to the Maryland/DC Records Committee, and the record was accepted in 2016 as a Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher.

THE "WESTERN" FLYCATCHER SPECIES COMPLEX

In 1989, The American Ornithologists' Union split Western Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*) into two species: Pacific-slope Flycatcher (*E. difficilis*) and Cordilleran Flycatcher (*E. occidentalis*) based on the work of Johnson and Marten (1988). The normal range for Pacific-slope Flycatcher is the Pacific coastal mountain ranges of Canada, the United States, and Mexico (Lowther et al. 2016b); for the Cordilleran Flycatcher, the range is the Rocky Mountains of the United States and Mexico (Lowther et al. 2016a) The two species are virtually indistinguishable in the wild (Lowther et al. 2016a, 2016b). In the western United States, the best characters for separation are voice, range, and habitat (Lowther et al. 2016a, 2016b). Obviously range and habitat are of no value when trying to identify these rare Northeast and Atlantic Coast vagrants. Voice is not always usable in the East, but DNA of scat (i.e., environmental DNA or eDNA) has occasionally been used to separate the species (eBird 2017).

SUMMARY OF NORTHEAST AND ATLANTIC COAST RECORDS

Members of the "Western" Flycatcher species complex are rare in the Northeast and along the Atlantic Coast. Table 1 shows the twelve state-bird-records-committee-accepted records for the species complex and whether the record was accepted for Pacific-slope or Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher. There are no eastern records for Cordilleran Flycatcher. Only records-committee-accepted records are included in this list. The records cluster geographically between Massachusetts and North Carolina, with two outliers in Florida. Records have occurred between 14 September and 15 January, with five occurring in

November and three in December. The earliest accepted record occurred in 1981. When the decades are compared, one record occurred in the 1980s, three in the 1990s, three in the 2000s, and five in the 2010s.

Table 1. State-bird-records-committee-accepted records of Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher for the Northeast and Atlantic Coast states.

State	Date	Location	Taxon	Citation
Maine	(no records)			MBRC 2017
Vermont	(no records)			VBRC 2016
New Hampshire	(no records)			NHRBC 2010
Massachusetts	10 Nov 2006	Manomet, Plymouth, Plymouth Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	MARC 2013
Rhode Island	(no records)			RIARC 2016
Connecticut	1–7 Dec 2007	Osbornedale State Park, Derby, New Haven Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	ARCC 2016
Connecticut	19–20 Dec 2015	Branford, New Haven Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	ARCC 2016
New York	14–16 Sep 1995	Fire Island Lighthouse, Suffolk Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	NYSARC 2015
Pennsylvania	16 Dec 1990	East Drumore Township, Lancaster Co.	Pacific-slope	PORC 2017
Pennsylvania	23 Nov 2012	State Game Lands 230, Cumberland Co.	Pacific-slope	PORC 2017
New Jersey	16 Nov 1981	Brigantine NWR, Atlantic Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	NJBRC 2016
Maryland/DC	16 Nov 2015 (this record)	Poplar Neck Rd., Choptank, Caroline Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	MD/DCRC 2016
Delaware	(no records)			DBRC 2015
West Virginia	(no records)			WVBC 2016
Virginia	12 Nov 1993	Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR, Northampton Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	VARCOM 2017
North Carolina	15 Jan 2000	Jordan Lake, Chatham Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	CBCBRC 2015
South Carolina	(no records)			CBCBRC 2015
Georgia	(no records)			GCRC 2015
Florida	8 Jan 2015	Manakin Manor South, Leon Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	FOSRC 2013, Greenlaw 2015
Florida	1–2 October 2015	Fort Pickens, Escambia Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	Andrew W. Kratter in litt. 28 Mar 2017

Table 2 summarizes reports submitted to eBird (not necessarily officially-accepted records) of eastern sightings for Pacific-slope or Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher. There are no Cordilleran Flycatcher reports. Some of these reports are merely date extensions of the Table 1 officially-accepted

records. Table 2 adds additional reports not found in Table 1 for New York, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Again, the reports cluster geographically between Massachusetts and North Carolina, with one outlier in Florida. Reports have occurred between 31 October and 22 January, with the majority of reports occurring from November to January.

Table 2. Submitted eBird Reports (not necessarily official state-bird-records-committee-accepted records) of Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher for the Northeast and Atlantic Coast states (eBird 2017). “P-s/C” = Pacific-slope/Cordilleran

State	Date	Location	Submitted Taxon	State-accepted Record
Maine	(no reports)			
Vermont	(no reports)			
New Hampshire	(no reports)			
Massachusetts	10 Nov 2006	Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, Plymouth, Plymouth Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	yes
Rhode Island	(no reports)			
Connecticut	19–20 Dec 2015	Branford Hills School, Burban Dr., Branford, New Haven Co.	Pacific-slope	yes, as P-s/C
New York	18–23 Nov 2015	Central Park, New York, New York Co.	Pacific-slope	for future review (Willie D’Anna, in litt., 26 Mar 2017)
New York	8–10 Dec 2016	Inwood Hill Park, New York, New York Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	for future review (Willie D’Anna, in litt., 26 Mar 2017)
Pennsylvania	18 Dec 1990	East Drumore Township, Lancaster Co.	Pacific-slope	date extension
Pennsylvania	18 Nov 2012	State Game Lands 230, Cumberland Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	date extension as P-s
Pennsylvania	24–25 Nov 2012	State Game Lands 230, Cumberland Co.	Pacific-slope	date extension
Pennsylvania	20 Dec 2015–5 Jan 2016	Berks County Heritage Center, Berks Co.	Pacific-slope	submitted to PORC for review
New Jersey	(no reports)			
Maryland/DC	16 Nov 2015 (this record)	Poplar Neck Rd., Choptank, Caroline Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	yes
Delaware	(no reports)			
West Virginia	(no reports)			
Virginia	12 Nov 1993	Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR, Northampton Co.	Pacific-slope	yes, as P-s/C
Virginia	29 Nov 1993	Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR, Northampton Co.	Pacific-slope	date extension?
North Carolina	15–22 Jan 2000	Jordan Lake, Chatham County	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	date extension
South Carolina	(no reports)			
Georgia	(no reports)			
Florida	31 Oct 2004	Fort De Soto Park, Pinellas Co.	Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran	not submitted to FOSRC (Andrew W. Kratter in litt., 28 Mar 2017)

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