

**FIRST AND SECOND MISSISSIPPI RECORDS OF COUCH'S
KINGBIRD (*TYRANNUS COUCHII*)**

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In 2016, two Couch's Kingbirds (*Tyrannus couchii*) were sighted and positively identified by voice in Mississippi, one at Singing River Island (Jackson County) from the Gulf Coast and another near the town of Money (Leflore County) from the Delta.

Couch's Kingbird is a medium to large flycatcher resembling the more often encountered Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*) with gray head, dark lores and auriculars, whitish throat, yellow underparts transitioning to a dusky upper breast, and brownish-black wings and tail (lacking the white veins on the outer rectrices of Western Kingbird). It is most similar in appearance to Tropical Kingbird (*T. melancholicus*), and indeed was once considered a subspecies of Tropical Kingbird. Where the ranges of Tropical and Couch's kingbirds overlap, and particularly outside of either's normal range, voice is the most reliable discriminator between the two. The range of Couch's Kingbird extends from southern Texas south along the Atlantic slope of eastern Mexico as far south as Belize. Over much of its southern range the species is year-round resident, but populations in Texas and northern Mexico are known to migrate in small flocks (Brush 1999).

In the southeastern U.S. east of Texas, confirmed sightings of the species have been recorded in Louisiana and Alabama (J.V. Remsen, personal communication; Duncan 2001). Based on currently published state checklists, there have been no confirmed sightings from Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, or Florida. As of

2000, Alabama had five reports of the Tropical/Couch's kingbird complex with one confirmed as Couch's Kingbird from Fort Morgan from October 1988 (Duncan 2001). As the closest eastern state to the south Texas limits of its normal range, Louisiana has had a larger share of sightings through around 2008 with ~16 confirmed Couch's Kingbird records (J.V. Remsen, personal communication). The only previous records of the Tropical/Couch's kingbird complex in Mississippi are from December 2014 with a confirmed Tropical Kingbird overwintering in Bay St. Louis (Knight 2016) and again the following two winters (2015-2016 and 2016-2017, likely the same bird). Records were positively identified as Tropical Kingbird, and documented with audio recordings (<http://www.xeno-canto.org/287873>).

During an Audubon Coastal Bird Survey on Singing River Island on 13 January 2016, Brian Johnston, Janet Wright, Charley Delmas, and Thomas Butera encountered three apparent Western Kingbirds. Later examination of the photographs of one of the kingbirds called the identification into question, suggesting instead a Tropical or Couch's kingbird. The photographs were shared with members of the Mississippi Bird Records Committee who agreed that the bird was a Tropical or Couch's kingbird. On 18 January BJ and JRR returned to Singing River Island around 1100 to retrace the standard survey route. We soon encountered a kingbird that appeared to be the bird in question along the high access road basically where BJ encountered the bird on 13 January. Notable field marks on this first viewing included the large bill, bright yellow belly that extended upward beyond the mid-breast, greenish-brown back, and brownish tail, although the sun was overhead and the light harsh. The bird sallied several times, but flew out of sight before we could get decent photographs.

We continued on the survey route down to the jetty where we had another encounter with a kingbird. This one appeared to have field marks typical of a Western Kingbird, and JRR heard one

faint vocalization that seemed to confirm this. We tracked back and forth along the water's edge over about 100 m three times as the bird landed on the jetty, allowed us to approach to within 50 m, and then flew behind us over the mudflat. We continued in this repetitive endeavor, unsure whether this might be the same bird seen earlier. Later examination of the photographs confirmed the smaller bill, grayer upper breast, and white outer veins on the outer tail feathers of a Western Kingbird. But it was hard to be certain in the field with an unknown number of kingbirds in the area.

We hiked back up to the access road and there again encountered the original kingbird (Figure 1) that now seemed all but certainly a separate bird both by geography and plumage. Viewing the bird through a spotting scope, the features supported Couch's or Tropical kingbird, and we realized a vocalization would be required to refine the identification to species. JRR heard the bird vocalize once while it was out of sight, but did not recognize the vocalization as that of Western Kingbird or Tropical Kingbird (having just the day before spent time collecting audio recordings of a Tropical Kingbird at Bay St. Louis).

We continued to work our way up and down the road for about an hour trying to get additional photographs and hopefully some audio recordings to obtain a definitive identification. After a few encounters with the bird, JRR began trying playback from an iPhone to elicit a vocalization, focusing at first on Tropical Kingbird vocalizations. Playback of Tropical Kingbird seemed to drive the bird away. It was perched within about 20 m, and then flew east toward the water farther from us when JRR played the recording. Trials with playback of Western Kingbird vocalizations seemed to have no effect.

JRR tried Couch's Kingbird last. When playback of the Couch's Kingbird vocalization began, the bird was out of JRR's sight behind a tall stand of grass, but visible to BJ as he was farther east behind the tall stand of grass. As the Couch's recording played,

the bird left its perch and flew nearer, to a perch 2 m above the ground and only 15 m northwest of JRR along the road. At this point JRR suspended playback and began recording with a handheld recorder (Olympus LS-10). Over several minutes, the bird issued several “kip” calls followed by a single trill that rose slightly in pitch before falling again (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Couch's Kingbird, 18 January 2016, Singing River Island. Photograph by Brian Johnston.

We were mindful of badgering the bird, so having obtained recordings of two vocalizations we decided we had what we needed and left the bird. The recordings have been submitted to the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science bioacoustics collection and may be accessed at www.xeno-canto.org/358192. Photographs, audio recordings and a sighting report were subsequently submitted to the Mississippi Bird Records Committee and accepted as a first

state record (MBRC Record 016-5). The bird remained at Singing River Island through at least April 20, 2017.

JRR was the only person in the party doing either playback or recording during the outing. BJ had no audio equipment. Playback and recording done together can be problematic. If any playback is recorded, it makes everything suspect. JRR was therefore careful, after issuing the playback audio, to close the application on the iPhone and then lock the screen on the phone before resuming recording with the handheld recorder. Similarly, JRR paused the handheld recorder before using playback, and watched the display for at least 2 seconds after hitting "pause" to note the recorded time and be sure that it had indeed stopped recording before then starting playback. JRR then checked the recorded time again before resuming the recording.

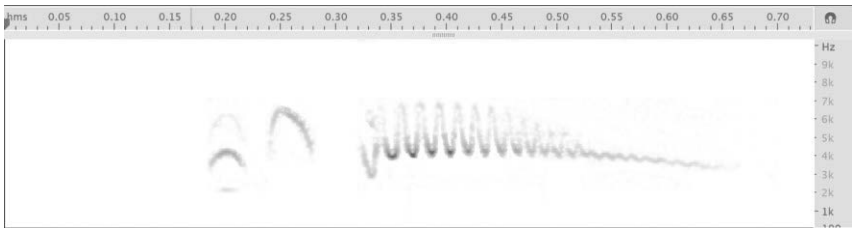


Figure 2. Spectrogram of audio recording collected from the Couch's Kingbird at Singing River Island, showing "kip" call and trill.

In a separate encounter on 30 November 2016 JRR arrived at a field site near Money, Mississippi at 0730 and immediately noticed an intriguing bird perched on a transmission line parallel to Sunny Side Rd. 150 meters west of the bridge over the Tallahatchie River. Lacking binoculars at the time, JRR recognized the bird as a flycatcher in the genus *Tyrannus*, identified it as a probable Western Kingbird, and reported the bird to the MISSBIRD email listserv. On 1 December, JRR returned to the field site and

attempted to get photographs of the bird, and the bird became very vocal as it was approached. JRR recognized the trilled vocalizations as that of Couch's Kingbird from the previous encounter with the species on Singing River Island, and was able to get recordings with a handheld recorder for documentation (www.xeno-canto.org/358180). Additional sightings of the bird were made by JRR on 8 and 14 December and by others as late as 3 January 2017. Hal Mitchell collected excellent audio recordings using a parabolic reflector on 3 December 2016 (Macauley Library Catalog Number 41665561). This record is awaiting a final decision by the Mississippi Bird Records Committee.

Finally, it is notable that Mississippi's first state records for Couch's and Tropical kingbirds were just over one year apart and both the first and second records for Couch's Kingbird occurred in the same calendar year. Another Couch's Kingbird was identified from extreme southeastern Louisiana (St. Tammany Parish) during December 2016 near Lake Pontchartrain at Fontainebleau State Park, one of five accepted records on eBird from Louisiana during the 2016 calendar year. In light of these recent sightings, additional records of the Tropical/Couch's kingbird complex from Mississippi may be likely in the near future.

Literature Cited

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