

Western Kingbirds on the Move

by Heather Nagy

Whenever I turn off State Route 146 onto Zion Ridge Road at The Wilds, I get the feeling I'm in Montana. The map may say I'm in Muskingum County, Ohio, but as the wind whips the endless grasses into shifting waves and the horned larks twitter by, there's an overwhelming sense of being at a high altitude in a state with plenty of wide-open spaces. I always see something interesting when I drive the roads in that reclaimed strip-mine area. It is fast becoming one of my favorite birding sites in any season. Thus, when friends visited me for just one day in early August, we jumped into the Subaru and drove to The Wilds. We weren't disappointed.

Among the expected birds, redwings and meadowlarks, we saw two kingbirds. Western kingbirds. Gray-birds-with-white-outer-tail-feathers western kingbirds (*Tyrannus verticalis*). And we couldn't believe it. The adult, with its bright yellow belly, was unmistakable. The one we believed to be an immature was a little tougher—though we had all seen plenty of adult birds, none of us had ever studied a young one. The decision on whether the records will be accepted is still pending with the Ohio Bird Records Committee, but the possibility of having western kingbirds nesting as far east as Ohio intrigued me. I researched their historical range, and started checking the Internet listservs of other areas. It appears this is a species on the move. If they aren't nesting here yet, they may well be within a couple of years.

While reports of single birds always show up along the eastern seaboard in fall as the birds migrate to coastal Florida and points south, in 1998 and 1999 the reports have been more numerous. Western kingbirds reports have popped up in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, North Carolina, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. As for previous Ohio breeding, there's just one record, in 1933. Edward Thomas, Curator of Natural History at the Ohio State Museum at the time, described it this way: "...on July 29, 1933 Messrs. Louis W. and Bernard R. Campbell discovered a family group of four Arkansas Kingbirds near Bono, in Lucas County" (Thomas 1933). Two of the three immature birds and an adult female were collected and the skins were presented to the museum.

The species has been working on an eastward breeding range expansion for years. It historically nested only west of roughly 95 degrees longitude (or along a line extending from the westernmost shore of Lake Superior through the southernmost tip of Texas). The first pair to cross the Mississippi River and nest successfully was apparently a pair near Kilbourne, Mason County, Illinois, in 1965. Over the years they became such regular nesters that Illinois dropped them from the review list in 1997 (David Johnson, pers. comm.). They have nested for several consecutive recent years at an industrial park in Northwest Indiana (Indiana Audubon website), and were discovered in 1998 nesting in Tennessee (U. of Tennessee website). This year, successful nests were documented for the first time in Arkansas and Louisiana (Bill Woods, pers. comm.). Ehrlich *et al.* (1988) attribute the range expansion since 1900 to expanding agriculture, which provided more nest sites. It is not too much of a stretch to believe that Ohio—particularly a place within the state that provides unique habitat—will be the next spot western kingbirds call home.

Kingbirds favor areas with wide-open spaces—prairies, open country with scattered trees, urban farms and ranches, grasslands, brushland, and pastures, especially those near orchards and shelterbelts (Bailey and Neidrach 1965, Ohlendorf 1974, Johnsgard 1979, Verner 1980, Ehrlich *et al.* 1988). In the arid west, they frequently nest in cottonwoods that occur where desert streams provide sufficient moisture for a

narrow band of trees and shrubs along their margins (USFS 1982). In the absence of appropriate cottonwood or ash trees, some 40 percent of western kingbirds nest on manmade structures, usually utility poles (USFS 1991). It is interesting that the pairs nesting this year near Shreveport, Louisiana and Memphis, Tennessee both used cross-bars of utility poles. Another nest near Shreveport (probably the same pair that later found success on the utility pole) was blown out of a large sycamore tree (Bill Wood, pers. comm.). Sites selected for nesting are always immediately adjacent to open expanses of habitat.

The Wilds provides all of this—9,000 acres of grasslands and ponds with patches of forests. The open meadowlands and quiet ponds provide a plethora of insects that make up the majority of western kingbird's diet, and provide the small vertebrates and seeds it less commonly utilizes.

Western Kingbirds build their nests 8-40 feet high, usually from 15 to 30 feet (Ehrlich *et al.* 1988). The nest itself is about 6 inches across and 3 inches high on the outside, the inner bowl 3 inches wide and 1 3/4 inches deep (Harrison 1978). It is constructed of hair and feathers, rootlets, twigs, plant fibers, cocoons, milkweed, and man-made items such as string or paper when available. It is lined with hair and plant down (Harrison 1978). When the kingbirds nest in trees, they prefer to place the nest against the trunk, in a crotch, or on a horizontal branch. However, there are records of western kingbirds utilizing abandoned robin and oriole nests, and nesting in barns (Harrison 1978, Johnsgard 1979, Verner 1980). They usually have one brood per year, with a clutch size of three to five, commonly four (Harrison 1978, Terres 1980, USFS 1982). In the southwest US, the breeding season is May and early June (USFS 1982). Nestlings were observed in the Shreveport nest June 12, 1999, and the Tennessee pair was photographed incubating eggs on June 20, 1988. Though early references indicate a preference for isolated sites, in recent years there has been a gradual trend to using nest sites near human activity. The pair in Shreveport, for example, built on a utility pole crossbar above a busy highway, between a convenience store parking lot and a golf driving range (Bill Woods, pers. comm.). A pair in New Mexico nested on an elementary school playground. They seem very tolerant of ecological change (USFS 1982).

The spring courtship display by the male is often described as frenetic. He darts into the air, fluttering, vibrating feathers, and giving a high-pitched trill. Later, the female nearly always incubates the eggs and tends the young, though occasionally the male may help. The eggs are creamy or pinkish, with brown, gray, or lavender mottling, often concentrated at the large end. Incubation takes 18 to 19 days, and the young will fledge 16 or 17 days after that, though they stay in the vicinity of the nest for another month or until migration (Terres 1980, USFS 1982, Ehrlich *et al.* 1988).

The adult kingbird is identified by its ashy gray head and upper parts, bright lemon-yellow belly, dark wings, and black tail with white outer feathers. The young have more olive on the back, a pale yellowish belly, and buffy edges on the wing coverts. Like the adults, they also have obvious white outer feathers on their black, squared tails. Like the eastern kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), the western kingbird has a relatively large head. Both perch along telephone lines, wire fences, and atop lone shrubs and trees, and fly out to snap up flying insects. The western more commonly also pounces on insects, spiders, caterpillars, or frogs (Bent 1942).

Come this spring, Ohio birders checking the perches along the roads through old strip mines might want to give a second look to birds with that classic kingbird silhouette. Humans have created a new class of habitat that welcomes new species. That common-looking bird just might be a Western Kingbird!

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Several web pages:

- Indiana Audubon Society (bird hotlines)
<http://www.indianaudubon.org/hotline>
- VGI Vision Foundation
<http://www.visionfoundation.org>
- The University of Arizona Center for Computing and Information Technology
<http://listserv.arizona.edu>
- Birding on the Web (Louisiana listserv)
<http://www-stat.wharton.upenn.edu/~siler/LOUI.html>
- The University of Tennessee (Tennessee Bird Records Committee)
<http://www.utm.edu/departments/artsci/biology/tbrc/wkingb.htm>
- Great Lakes Birding (The Arkansas Kingbird in Ohio (1933))
<http://www.greatlakesbirding.com/arkngbrdinohio.htm>

A Bell's Vireo in Far Eastern Ohio, with a Summary of its Status in Eastern North America

by Michael A. Patten

On 10 August 1999 I discovered a Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) at Barkcamp State Park, Belmont County, Ohio. This park is situated in the foothills of the Appalachians near the border of West Virginia (~25 km due west of Wheeling), a state in which this species has never been recorded (Hall 1983). I observed the bird at close range (4-5 m) for several minutes through Bausch & Lomb Elite 10x42 binoculars. It was with a small flock of Carolina chickadees (*Poecile carolinensis*) that had responded to my "pishing." The vireo was silent during my observation. I noted the following:

The bird was larger and of heavier build than a chickadee, and larger than a typical warbler (Parulidae). Most noticeable was the thick, rather heavy bill, which had a distinct hook at the tip of the maxilla. The bill was mostly grayish in color. The feet and sturdy legs were bluish. The eyes were dark, with no distinct paling in the irides. It foraged rather slowly, but actively jerked about its long tail in a manner reminiscent of a gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila* spp.). Its plumage was somewhat worn; thus, it looked less like a first fall bird than an adult. It was basically grayish-olive above and whitish below. Olive color on the upperparts was brightest on the back and rump, and extended into the nape. Even though the crown was slightly grayer, it did not contrast with the mantle but rather blended into it. The chin and throat were white, and neither was sharply set off from the gray auriculars (i.e., it lacked a clean division such as shown by a blue-headed vireo *V. solitarius*). The flanks were strongly washed with bright yellow; this color extended across the undertail coverts (at least distally) and expanded laterally at the sides of the breast. The wing coverts were olive-gray, contrasting with blackish-gray remiges. Small whitish tips to the greater coverts formed a single somewhat narrow wing-bar; there was no appreciable upper wing-bar. The innermost secondaries (including the "tertials") were narrowly edged with whitish.

Aside from the bird's behavior, its facial pattern was its most distinctive feature. It had neither a bold supercilium nor bold spectacles. Instead, it exhibited a thin whitish supercilium not much wider than the dusky-gray transocular line. The supercilium extended anteriorly to the bill, stopping at a narrow point just above the dark lores, and thus not connecting across the fore-head. The posterior end of the supercilium arced down a bit at the back edge of the eye, but did not encircle the rear edge because it was broken by the ragged terminus to the transocular line. A blurry whitish arc bordered the lower one-fourth of the eye, but it, too, was stopped at either end by the transocular line.

Geographic variation in the Bell's vireo follows a simple, nearly clinal pattern. Nominate birds in the eastern part of the range are fairly bright olive above with bright yellow flanks, whereas birds in the far West are essentially all gray in spring, with little to no trace of olive or yellow. The two described subspecies in the middle are intermediate. Based on the olive upperparts and bright yellow flanks, the Ohio bird, quite expectedly, showed the characters of the nominate subspecies. A bright example of *V. b. medius* of western Texas is perhaps not eliminated, but that subspecies would be extremely unlikely to reach Ohio and it tends to be grayer on the upperparts with less extensive yellow on the breast (pers. obs.). Both *V. b. arizonae* of the Southwest and, especially, the Endangered *V. b. pusillus* of coastal southern California are much