

## A neotropical bird flies north: the Greenish Elaenia



*Identifying Myiopagus viridicatus isn't easy, but then, what rare discovery is?*

James G. Morgan and Linda M. Feltner

**A**T 11 A.M. CDT, May 20, 1984, while birding in the Houston Audubon Society's Louis Smith Bird Sanctuary at High Island, Galveston County, Texas, we located a small and unusual flycatcher that neither of us had seen before on the upper Texas coast. After about twenty seconds of observation, Morgan commented that the bird had the appearance and "jizz" of an elaenia flycatcher from the neotropics. After approximately five more minutes of very careful observation, Morgan stated that he believed the bird to be a Greenish Elaenia (*Myiopagus viridicatus*), a species he had observed numerous times in Mexico. Feltner, also familiar with the bird from Mexico, immediately agreed with this identification.

During the next twenty minutes, Feltner began sketching the bird and Morgan recorded all the visible field marks and behavioral characteristics. Attempts were made to photograph the bird, which proved at best difficult.

At approximately 11:45 a.m. CDT, Morgan left the sanctuary to place phone calls to Ted L. Eubanks, Jr. and Ron Braun. Both are experienced bird banders and field observers with experience in the neotropics. Morgan suggested they come to the sanctuary and bring their mist nets. At 2:20 p.m., Ted and Virginia Eubanks and Ron and Marcia Braun arrived at the High Island sanctuary. Feltner quickly relocated the *Myiopagus* flycatcher and all present observed it for about two minutes. Eubanks, and the Brauns, having previously seen Greenish Elaenias in Mexico, agreed with our identification.

Five mist nets were then set up in the sanctuary in an effort to capture the bird. After the nets were in place, we attempted to lure it into one of the nets by having Eubanks imitate the call of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*). The *Myiopagus* flycatcher quickly reacted and flew to a perch directly over Eubanks. The bird, obviously agitated, scolded vigorously in reaction to the owl call. During this exercise, the bird did not fly into the mist nets. We then left this area of the sanctuary to let the flycatcher return to its normal behavior.

At 4:05 p.m., we succeeded in netting the flycatcher. With the bird in hand, we noted the bright yellow crown patch, and the following measurements were made: length — 138 mm; wing chord — 64.4 mm; exposed culmen — 11.7 mm; nostris — 6.6 mm; width at base of bill — 4.9 mm; tarsus — 18.7 mm; tail — 58.5 mm. Morgan and Eubanks took numerous photographs of the bird in hand. The bird was then banded (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band number 1590-63597) and released. Eleven other observers saw the bird that day.

After the presence of the Greenish Elaenia was made known to the birding community, it was seen by approximately seventy-five additional observers. To the best of our knowledge, the bird was last observed on May 23, 1984.

**T**HE LOUIS SMITH BIRD sanctuary comprises 12 acres of woods, exposed grasses, and gardens. The woodlot on the sanctuary is approximately eight



Even at this distance it is difficult to identify *Myiopagus viridicata*. The imitated call of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl agitated the flycatcher, who scolded vigorously from a nearby perch. Photo/James G. Morgan.

acres and is dominated by hackberry and honey locust trees with several large water oaks and numerous mulberry trees around the edge. The understory is dominated by yaupon and privet (*Ligustrum*) and there is extensive liana among the trees, predominantly greenbrier vines (smilax). The sanctuary is located at the southern edge of the small coastal town of High Island, Texas, at a distance of approximately 750 meters from the Gulf of Mexico shoreline. Within the woodlot, the bird fed by flycatching beneath the canopy and among the lower branches, mainly within the southeastern portion of the sanctuary where the tree heights are normally less than 6-8 meters.

Weather conditions preceding this discovery consisted of 1½ days of rain and intermittent thunderstorms, which brought numerous migrant flycatchers, thrushes, vireos and warblers to shelter within the Louis Smith Bird Sanctuary. When and how the Greenish Elaenia arrived on the upper Texas coast is a matter of speculation. However, it is interesting to note that when Eubanks examined the bird in the hand, he found considerable deposits of subcutaneous fat in the bird's fulcrum, suggesting the bird had not recently made a large expenditure of energy.

The measurements and fourteen color transparencies of this *Myiopagus* flycatcher were sent to John P. O'Neill, at the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, and to John W. Fitzpatrick, at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Upon O'Neill's recommendation, the measurements, photographs, and field notes were also sent to Wesley E. Lanyon, a recognized expert on tyrant flycatchers at the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Fitzpatrick stated that the bird was a possible *Myiopagus viridicata*. He further commented, "Clearly the best candidate for your rare discovery is *M. viridicata*, but the photos and measurements in no way rule out *M. cotta* (Jamaica) which is equally likely. *M. flavivertex* (Amazonia) even would match the photos, although it isn't very likely!" On the other hand, O'Neill stated that there was "no doubt" that the bird was a Greenish Elaenia (*M. viridicata*). O'Neill believed



Greenish Elaenia (*Myiopagus viridicata*), High Island, Texas, May 20, 1984. Note the bright yellow crown patch. Photo/James G. Morgan.

that the bird's reaction to the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl call was an important factor in ruling out *M. cotta*, since Morgan had pointed out that no *Glaucidium* owl is known from the island of Jamaica (A.O.U., 1983). Lanyon was asked to consider *M. viridicata*, *M. cotta*, and *M. flavivertex*. Through correspondence, Lanyon stated, "After studying your field notes and colored slides, there's no doubt in my mind that you had *Myiopagus viridicata* in the hand."

**T**HE FOLLOWING description was obtained from our in-the-hand examination: crown medium charcoal gray with some olive tones near the nape and a semi-concealed bright yellow patch; nape grayish to olive green; back bright olive green; rump olive green, slightly less bright than the back; tail brownish with outer rectrices greenish olive brown, central rectrices medium brown with rufous tones; wings olive green with the primaries edged brighter yellowish-green, upper wing coverts brownish olive, no wing bars; lores dark, forming part of an eyeline; superciliary whitish, more prominent in front of eye, merging with white eyelids, then becoming almost nonexistent behind the eye; auriculars grayish, covered by dark eyeline, then some thin white streaking or flecking; rictal bristles evident; chin light gray; throat gray; breast darker gray, streaked with olive at ragged demarcation with belly; belly and crissum medium lemon yellow; axillars and underwing coverts medium lemon yellow; bill basically black, the upper mandible all black,

the lower mandible black with basal quarter shading to horn color, eye color dark (pupil black, iris a very dark reddish brown); legs black.

As Fitzpatrick has pointed out, the identification of *Myiopagus* flycatchers is not an easy matter. However, we believe the bird's measurements and description, the color photographs, and the bird's behavior in the presence of an imitated call of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, combine to provide the necessary evidence to establish the identity of the bird we discovered as *M. viridicata*. Two renowned ornithologists, Lanyon and O'Neill, have corroborated our identification. Fitzpatrick, a competent museum consultant, believed that *M. viridicata* was clearly the best candidate for our discovery. Thus, we believe our conclusion on the bird's identity is quite sound.

**T**O THE BEST of our knowledge, this marks the first occurrence of a *Myiopagus* flycatcher in the United States, in fact, we believe this provides the first Greenish Elaenia record in the United States. The species is normally resident from Nayarit, Durango, San Luis Potosi and southern Tamaulipas, south along both slopes of Mexico (including the Tres Marias Islands and Yucatan Peninsula), and Central America (throughout, but in Costa Rica confined primarily to the Pacific slope), to Panama (Pacific slope throughout, including Coiba and the Pearl Islands, locally on the Caribbean slope in Colon and the Canal Zone), and in South America from western Colombia south, west of the Andes, to western

Ecuador (including Puna Island), and locally from Venezuela and southeastern Colombia south, east of the Andes, to southeastern Peru, central Bolivia, northern Argentina, and south-central and eastern Brazil (A.O.U., 1983).

The photographs of the Greenish Elaenia remain on file at the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, and they have been deposited in the Texas Photo-Record File at Texas A & M University.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank John P. O'Neill and Wesley E. Lanyon for their prompt confirmation of our identification and John W. Fitzpatrick for his invaluable comments. We acknowledge the help of T. Ben Feltner, who reviewed the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions. Special thanks go to Ted Eubanks, Jr., and Ron Braun, who responded so quickly to our requests for help in netting the bird, the result of which allowed this documentation of a new species for the United States.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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