

The Loggerhead Kingbird in Florida: The Evidence Revisited

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ABSTRACT

The Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*), endemic to the West Indies, has been reported in Florida on at least six occasions, with three supported by archived photographs. These reports form the basis for the species' inclusion on the lists of birds known to occur in North America north of Mexico. However, after reviewing all the evidence we could locate, we concluded that none of the records claimed can be verified independently as definitely pertaining to a Loggerhead Kingbird. Depending upon the evidence available, the Giant Kingbird (*T. cubensis*), endemic to Cuba, Gray Kingbird (*T. dominicensis*), or Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*) appear to be among likely alternatives. We suggest, therefore, that the Loggerhead Kingbird be removed from formal lists of birds recorded from North America north of Mexico.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the Upper Florida Keys Christmas Bird Count on 29 December 1971, Frances Hames and Mary Crane (both now deceased) observed an unexpected kingbird in Islamorada, "first taken to be an Eastern Kingbird" (*Tyrannus tyrannus*; Stevenson 1972), among a wintering flock of Western Kingbirds (*T. verticalis*) and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (*T. forficatus*). Two days later, the count's compiler (Sprunt) took a series of color photos of this bird. Although no longer recalling details, Sprunt may have suggested its identification as a Loggerhead Kingbird (*T. caudifasciatus*), a widespread Greater Antillean species never before reported in the United States, with which he had some limited prior field experience (Sprunt 1972). We know of no contemporary written field notes or analysis. At that time, photographs of endemic West Indian birds were not widely available; the principal illustrations were those in Bond (1971), many of which were simplified, even misleading. For the

Loggerhead Kingbird, the illustration was merely a line drawing of a bird's head.

The report evidently was submitted as a Loggerhead Kingbird both for the Christmas Bird Count itself (Sprunt 1972) and to Henry Stevenson, that season's Regional Editor for *American Birds*. Two photographs (TTRS P25 and P26), both appearing to be differently magnified enlargements cropped from one of those taken by Sprunt 31 December 1971 (now TTRS P708, Fig. 1), were archived at Tall Timbers Research Station, where Stevenson kept an office. At least one photo of the bird was sent to James Bond at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia. Bond must have conveyed his opinion about it both to Stevenson and to others; he also expressed it directly in print several years later without details (Bond 1978:3). Bond clearly considered the photo(s) he saw to pertain to a Giant Kingbird (*T. cubensis*), a Cuban endemic even less well-known than the Loggerhead and also rather poorly illustrated in Bond (1971).

Bond's opinion apparently was not well-received by some observers who saw the bird and who agreed with the identification, then widely held by Florida birders. Edscorn (1972) wrote, for example, "Some question has arisen that the [first-ever Loggerhead Kingbird] was a Giant Kingbird (Cuban) based on photos . . . but those of us who saw the bird have no doubt." Stevenson (1972) referred to the bird as "*Tyrannus dubius*" [sic], however, and after summarizing the controversy, concluded that "neither of these two potentially new species for Florida can claim an unequivocal place on the state list."

The following winter, presumably the same bird reportedly returned to Islamorada. The timing and duration of its second stay were not published and a statement that it was photographed again



Figure 1. Kingbird photographed at Islamorada, Florida, 31 December 1971 (TTRS P708). This photograph and others were the primary basis for inclusion of Loggerhead Kingbird on the United States list, and later on the Florida list, despite the fact that James Bond believed it a Giant Kingbird. Photograph by Alexander Sprunt IV.

by Sprunt (Woolfenden 1973) is untrue. Further details pertaining to this later appearance seem unavailable. By now it had become "*The Loggerhead Kingbird*" (italics ours), although Woolfenden (1973) referred readers back to the controversy mentioned by Stevenson (1972).

No further claims of this species were made before the American Birding Association published its first checklist (ABA 1975a). That list failed to include either the Loggerhead or the Giant Kingbird. Perhaps spurred by comments from Floridians, the ABA did place the Loggerhead Kingbird on its first checklist supplement (ABA 1975b). Guy McCaskie, a member of the ABA Checklist Committee at that time, recalls (*in litt.*) no discussion of the merits of the addition of that species to the list or any review of the photos by the committee.

With the Loggerhead Kingbird established in the lore of Florida and American birding, there soon came subsequent reports. Two later observations are supported by photographs that are still archived: Miami 7–14 March 1976 (Stevenson 1976, TTRS P113 [Fig. 2] and P114), and Islamorada 25 November–17 December 1976 (Edscorn 1977, Stevenson 1977, TTRS P136). The two photos of the Miami bird were stated (Stevenson 1976, paraphrased) to be clear enough to allow removal of Loggerhead Kingbird from Florida's hypothetical list, an unofficial compilation that Stevenson apparently maintained. Additional claims were made in later years. At least one, "in the opinion of the observers, definitely not a Gray Kingbird (*T. dominicensis*)," was reportedly photographed (Kale 1977). The photos of the 1977 bird, apparently now lost, were stated by Kale (1977, paraphrased) "to illustrate the difficulty in determination . . . [for] it is not possible to easily separate [Loggerhead from Gray] in the field." None of the birds photographed in the 1970s apparently were described by written details. Of the handful of later sightings that reached print, none apparently were photographed and only one was submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee. That report was not accepted.

Eastern Kingbird, Gray Kingbird, Loggerhead Kingbird, Giant Kingbird: confusion seems to have reigned during the period before good quality photos of some West Indian species, particularly

Loggerhead Kingbird, reached the hands of active North American field birders. Because of the uncertainty surrounding previous events, primarily in the 1970s, that led to the Loggerhead Kingbird's addition to the state and national avifaunas, we believed it appropriate to review carefully some of the original photos in the context of modern knowledge about that species and to publish our results.

THE LOGGERHEAD KINGBIRD

The Loggerhead Kingbird (Figs. 3–6) is found throughout the Greater Antilles, east to Puerto Rico, west to Cuba and the Cayman Islands, and north to the northern Bahama Islands east of the southern end of the Florida peninsula. Historically, because of inter-island variation, each population was considered a separate species. During the 19th century the group, then generally known in English as petcharies, was usually placed in the genus *Pitangus* (now restricted to kiskadees) because of similarity in size and structure. Ridgway (1905) created a genus *Tolmarchus* for them, mostly because of differences in coloration and a broader, more depressed bill structure. He did not consider them members of *Tyrannus* (kingbirds) primarily because of their bill structure and because their primaries are short and rounded compared to kingbirds' relatively long, attenuated primaries (Ridgway 1907).

Combining all the petcharies into a single polytypic species was done with one simple elegant sentence by Hellmayr (1927): "According to my conception of specific units, the representatives of *Tolmarchus* on the various islands should be classed as subspecies, their characters being only differences of degree in size and col-



Figure 2. Kingbird photographed at Miami, Florida, 8 March 1976 (TTRS P113), said by Stevenson (1976), without stating a reason, to furnish evidence for removing Loggerhead Kingbird from Florida's (unofficial) hypothetical list. That statement may have reflected misunderstanding of its field characters. Photograph by W. J. Bolte.

oration." Bond (1936) supported this treatment but called the species "Loggerhead Flycatcher" (as did some others of the era, including Barbour 1923), asserting that the name 'petchary' was an onomatopoeic rendering of Gray Kingbird calls. After laying the groundwork in a footnote by asserting that *Tolmarchus* resembled *Tyrannus* more than *Pitangus* (Bond 1950: 97), *Tolmarchus* was combined into *Tyrannus* by Bond (1956:105). Presumably this union was based on his philosophy (e.g., Bond 1971:13) that taxonomy and nomenclature should emphasize similarities between birds rather than differences.

Later Bond (1958:7) claimed support for his treatment of *Tolmarchus* from an obscure earlier paper by a German taxonomist. Thus the Petchary, or Loggerhead Flycatcher, became the Loggerhead Kingbird in Bond's subsequently published works (e.g., Bond 1971).

To avoid possible confusion in the following discussion, we shall simply use the English name 'Loggerhead' for the Loggerhead Kingbird (*sensu* Bond 1971) and shall restrict the word 'kingbird' to



Figure 3. Loggerhead Kingbird (*jamaicensis*), St. James Parish, Jamaica, mid-February 1991. This figure, together with Figs. 4 and 5, illustrate most of the major field marks of the Loggerhead Kingbird from the western part of its range (Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica, Caymans): Long bill not especially deep; short rounded primaries; squarish head often showing a small posterior crest; variably blackish cap and nape contrasting with grayish back; prominently whitish-edged wing coverts; whitish tail outline (most prominent on underside of tip); *Myiarchus*-like "jizz". Photograph by M. C. Wheeler.

members of strict *Tyrannus* (*sensu* Ridgway 1907). Most people familiar with Loggerheads in the field do not consider them particularly kingbird-like. The bill is long but not deep (*cf.* Figs. 4, 5), about three times longer from the nostrils to the tip than its depth at the nostrils. Kingbirds' bills, on the other hand, are relatively shorter and deeper, giving them a more wedge-shaped appearance when viewed laterally. The square-looking head shape with a slight posterior crest (*cf.* Figs. 3, 4) is a typical field character for Loggerheads; in the Cuban countryside they are even known as "pitirre meñudo (crested kingbird)" (P. Regalado Ruiz pers. comm.). However, individuals may mostly collapse their crests, as in Figs. 5 and 6. The relatively short length and rounded shape of the Loggerheads' primaries (*cf.* Figs. 3, 5) in all populations differs from the longer, more pointed wing shape of kingbirds and contrasts with a relatively longer tail compared to most kingbirds. Kingbirds' primaries are also mostly notched.

The plumage of Loggerheads varies between populations and therefore is difficult to characterize. The Cuban and Bahamian populations are those most likely to occur in Florida (Robertson and Kushlan 1984). All populations show a general uniformity in the dark color of the cap and nape, contrasting with the paler color of the back. The mainland Cuban *caudifasciatus* (Fig. 4) has a black cap/nape contrasting with a gray back, whereas the Bahamian *bahamensis* (Fig. 5) usually shows a dark ashy-brown cap/nape contrasting with a more olive gray-brown back. Cuban Loggerheads usually are entirely snowy white below (Fig. 4), whereas Bahamian Loggerheads usually are yellow-



Figure 4. Loggerhead Kingbird (*caudifasciatus*), Cayo Coco, Cuba, 25 April 1999. Photograph by J. Bangma.



Figure 5. Loggerhead Kingbird (*bahamensis*), Abaco, Bahamas, 12 March 1999. Photograph by L. Manfredi.

vented (Fig. 5), but these characters vary among individuals and with age and season. Both populations have considerable whitish edging on the wing coverts and most flight feathers (cf. Figs. 4, 5). Most tail feathers, especially including the outer, and the tips of the tail particularly on the underside, also are white (cf. Figs. 3, 5). The Jamaican *jamaicensis* (Fig. 3), the Grand Cayman *caymanensis*, and the Isle of Youth *flavescens* generally fall between the Bahamian and Cuban populations in overall appearance.

The populations *gabbii* of Hispaniola and *taylori* of Puerto Rico differ from the more western populations in having mainly rusty

the ground, often appearing and behaving more like a *Myiarchus* than a *Tyrannus*.

The Giant Kingbird (Fig. 7), now confined to Cuba and considered rare even as long ago as the 1920s (Barbour 1923), is quite similar in plumage to the Cuban Loggerhead (distinctions are beyond the scope of this paper). Otherwise it is mostly like other kingbirds in proportions, except for its very large bill and relatively shorter tail. The Giant Kingbird now is officially classified as endangered (Collar et al. 1994). In the 19th century it was collected several times in the southern Bahamas (Great Inagua and Caicos Islands; Buden 1987).

rather than whitish tips to the wing coverts and lacking most white in the tail, particularly on the underside of the tip (Fig. 6). Overall, these populations (*gabbii* and *taylori*) are browner above compared to any of the others. They also have relatively shorter tails than the other populations.

Behaviorally, Loggerheads tend to be shy and sluggish, although some populations, notably the Jamaican, may be more active and seem more visible. Pedro Regalado Ruiz, who has studied them in Cuba (pers. comm.), has found that Cuban Loggerheads typically hunt from woodland interior perches well below the canopy, where they often glean insects rather than hawk for them. Smith, who has seen representatives of six of the seven named populations, usually has observed them within a few meters of



Figure 6. Loggerhead Kingbird (*taylori*), Ciales, Puerto Rico, May 1997. This photo shows that Loggerhead Kingbirds from the eastern part of their range (Hispaniola, Puerto Rico) are browner overall, with much less white on the wings and tail, compared to other populations. Photograph by L. Miranda.



Figure 7. Giant Kingbird, Area Protegida "La Belén," Cuba, 17 February 1999. This image demonstrates the overall Loggerhead-like pattern of this species and its noticeably wedge-shaped bill. From video by G. Mackiernan.

An old record from Isla Mujeres off the coast of Yucatán, Mexico (Salvin 1889), has been questioned (AOU 1998) although probably without a sound basis (Smith 2001). Whether such outlying records reflect a wider former breeding range or non-breeding dispersal is unknown. Because all outlying specimens were collected during winter (Salvin 1889, Buden 1987), the latter interpretation may be more likely.

DATA REVIEW

In reviewing the available photos from Florida, it was apparent that none of the birds photographed were clearly and unequivocally Loggerheads. Photographs of the Islamorada bird, taken in 1971 by Sprunt (e.g., Fig. 1), show a bird with plumage seemingly not unlike that of a Cuban Loggerhead but apparently without its structure. From the rounded head and its relatively short, wedge-shaped bill it appears to be a kingbird (*Tyrannus sensu* Ridgway 1907), possibly a Giant Kingbird as James Bond thought, although we are unprepared to identify it as such. Other photos (e.g., TTRS P703) show pointed primaries and other typical kingbird features.

The two archived photographs taken at Miami in March 1976 (e.g., Fig. 2), show a bird lacking not only the structure but also the plumage features of a Loggerhead. Based solely on these photos, we suspect that it is a wet and overly worn Eastern Kingbird, but again we leave the matter of correctly identifying it to others. Some literature suggests that the color of the crown patch (apparently yellowish especially in another photo of this bird) indicates that it is not an Eastern Kingbird; Ridgway (1907) stated that the shade of the crown patch in kingbirds varies depending on age, sex, and other factors. Without supporting documentation we do not know why this bird was identified as a Loggerhead and can only speculate that Stevenson's 1976 statement about the photos providing sufficient evidence to accord Loggerhead Kingbird an unequivocal place on Florida's state list was based on some misunderstanding of that

species' appearance. Such a misunderstanding may have reflected the inadequate descriptions and illustrations then generally available (e.g., cf. Bond 1971). Photographs of the late autumn 1976 bird at Islamorada, both the one archived (TTRS P136) and others we were privileged to see, do not clearly show any plumage or structural characters of a Loggerhead. No photo of this bird that we saw is so clear and well-posed as to encourage us even to speculate about what the bird might have been.

We also reviewed field notes made available to us for two other Florida individuals identified as or thought to be Loggerheads (in addition to the archived photographs). The first, at Hypoluxo Island, Palm Beach Co., 5 October 1984 (Atherton and Atherton 1985), was reviewed by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC 85-073) but was not accepted (Dowling 1988). We see no reason for this report to be reconsidered, for the descriptions fail to describe any characters that we believe are truly distinguishing of Loggerheads. The second, a bird at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Recreation Area, Miami-Dade Co., 11–12 September 1990

(hitherto unpublished), was sketched in the field by one of the observers (M. C. Wheeler) but was only described very simply from fairly brief sightings. The sketch and other field notes do suggest the plumage characters of some Loggerheads (e.g., Cuban), but they are not sufficiently detailed to rule out Giant or possibly other kingbirds. The observers withheld publication for that reason (M. C. Wheeler pers. comm.) and we see no basis for pursuing this report further. Other reports cited or alluded to by Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) or Stevenson and Anderson (1994) have no existing supporting details of which we are aware.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The photographs of the bird at Islamorada secured 31 December 1971, those previously archived (TTRS P25 and P26), plus the originals all taken by Sprunt on that date (now TTRS P698–P708; Fig. 1), in our opinion do not provide convincing evidence that this bird was a Loggerhead Kingbird. Sprunt no longer holds to his earlier belief that the bird he photographed was that species. Pending further review, we believe that its identity, the basis of Loggerhead Kingbird's addition to the American Birding Association checklist, instead should be considered uncertain.

We think that the photographs of birds at Miami and Islamorada in 1976 (TTRS P113 [Fig. 2], P114, and P136, et. al.) in themselves also are inadequate evidence to establish in either case that a Loggerhead Kingbird was photographed. We cannot deny the possibility in either case that a Loggerhead Kingbird might have been seen by the observers, but we see no unequivocal indication of that possibility in any of the photos available to us. No contemporary field notes were archived for these birds. We believe that Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) therefore were mistaken in considering that these photographs, along with those secured in 1971, provided satisfactory verifiable archived evidence that Loggerhead Kingbird ever has occurred in Florida.

To the best of our knowledge (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, AOU 1998), the presence of the Loggerhead Kingbird on scientifically based lists of birds known from Florida or elsewhere in North America north of Mexico rests primarily on the stated identification of these photographs. As far as we know, within the stated region, (a) no specimen has been taken, (b) no bird has been measured and studied in the hand, and (c) no sight report, whether supported by photos or not, has been carefully reviewed and then accepted as a Loggerhead Kingbird by any records or checklist committee. In the absence of additional supportive evidence, therefore, we recommend that Loggerhead Kingbird be removed from such "official" lists. This recommendation is *not* an opinion that Loggerhead Kingbird has never occurred in North America north of Mexico. We simply suggest that the verifiable evidence we are aware of is insufficient to confirm that it has.

If any lesson is to be learned from this exercise in hindsight, it is the value of curated archives, which allow earlier identifications to be reassessed. Another lesson is the potentially cascading effect of placing an apparently speculative identification of a generally unfamiliar species "on the record." We doubt that most of the subsequent inadequately supported reports of Loggerhead Kingbirds would have been made if the original probable misidentification had not received prominence. Perhaps if a Loggerhead Kingbird subsequently did appear in Florida or elsewhere north of Mexico, observers otherwise might have made a greater effort to document it thoroughly.

In retrospect, Henry Stevenson may have shown the best judgment in this matter by simply referring to the original bird as "*Tyrannus dubius*." Nearly thirty years later, that wisdom still continues to shine.

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