WESTERN BIRDS

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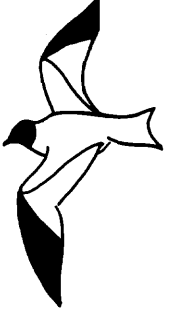

THE EASTERN KINGBIRD IN CALIFORNIA

Tim Manolis

The breeding status of the Eastern Kingbird *(Tyrannus tyrannus)* in California has been open to question for some time. It has long been known to breed in south central Oregon (Gabrielson & Jewett 1940) and northern Nevada (Linsdale 1936). Noting a number of records for the "Eastern border of the state", Grinnel & Miller (1944) assumed that the species "probably" bred in this part of California. Their assumption was taken as fact by many subsequent authors (Pough 1957, Peterson 1961, etc.) but, as McCaskie & De Benedictis (1966) point out, " . . . there is no evidence of this species having nested in California."

In the summer of 1971, a pair of Eastern Kingbirds nested successfully at Honey Lake Wildlife Area, near Wendel, Lassen County, California. This paper documents the first recorded nesting for the state, and presents all California records of Eastern Kingbirds known to me. A discussion of the possible significance of these records is also included.

FIRST NESTING IN CALIFORNIA

On 14 August 1971, Richard Stallcup observed an Eastern Kingbird in a row of willows along a pond near the headquarters of the Honey Lake Wildlife Area. While he was showing the bird to Georgianne Manolis, Anne Manolis, and me, a second Eastern Kingbird joined the first bird in driving a family group of Western Kingbirds *(T. verticalis)* away from the willows. One of the two Eastern Kingbirds then flew to a nest that contained at least two, and possibly three, nearly fledged young. The nest was an open, cup-shaped structure of twigs, situated in the fork of a willow branch approximately 6 m above the surface of the pond. John Revill, then a seasonal aide on the Wildlife Area, had known of the presence of the adult birds, but not the nest, for a number of weeks prior to our visit. He and Ian Tait also viewed the nest on this date. These birds were not seen when I visited the area on 12 June 1971

and, judging from the stage of the nesting cycle on 14 August, they probably arrived sometime in late June or early July. This would be in keeping with other "arrival" dates for the species in eastern California (see discussion of spring and summer records below). Two adults and two fledged immatures were foraging from roadside fences within 100m of the nest on 27 August 1971. The young were still being fed by the parents, although they made some attempts to obtain their own food.

A number of visits were made to the Honey Lake area in May and June 1972 by the author and others. On 21 May no Eastern Kingbirds were found around the Headquarters. On 29 May, however, a pair was observed by Rich Stallcup et al. in the same row of willows where nesting had occurred the previous year. They appeared to be searching for possible nest sites, and it seemed probable that the two birds were either the pair that had nested the previous year or their young. One of these birds was photographed (Figure 1). Disappointingly, a thorough search of the area on 10 and 11 June by Bruce Webb and the author failed to reveal any sign of the birds. Other observers in the area later in June also failed to find these birds (R. Stallcup and Tim Osborne pers.

Figure 1. One of a pair of Eastern Kingbirds (*T. tyrannus*) at the Honey Lake Wildlife Area Headquarters, Lassen Co., 29 May 1972.

Photo by Bruce Webb

comm.). Why these birds failed to nest is unclear. The habitat did not appear to have been altered to any extent in the intervening months. Perhaps, because the birds were present at least two weeks prior to the arrival time of the nesting pair of the preceding year, they faced increased competition for nest sites with the earlier nesting Western Kingbirds, a common species in the area.

Though this is the first documented nest for the state, the species has quite likely nested in California before. It has been suspected of nesting at Deep Springs, Inyo Co., in past years (R. Stallcup pers. comm.), and a pair was suspected of nesting near Lava Beds National Monument, Siskiyou Co., in the summer of 1970 (Robert Edens, fide John Revill, pers. comm.).

SPRING AND SUMMER RECORDS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of records of Eastern Kingbird in California through 1971. The species is quite rare along the coast of California in the spring and summer, and most of the records for this time of year come from the Great Basin region east of the Sierra Nevada and north of the Mohave Desert. This area borders the southwestern edge of the species' breeding range in western North America. Most of the Eastern Kingbirds nesting in the western part of their range reach the area in spring by first migrating north along the east coast of Mexico from wintering grounds in South America (Friedmann et al. 1957). Evidently they then make a broad turn to the northwest as indicated by the scarcity of spring (March-mid May) records for the Southwest. There are two records in Arizona (Phillips et al.1964) one in Nevada (Grater 1939), and two in southern California (see appendix).

It seems logical to assume that most records of Eastern Kingbird in California in late May, June, and July are of birds that have entered the state from the northeast. Possibly these birds were bred the preceding year along the western edge of the species' range. An analysis of banding records of the Cardinal *(Cardinalis cardinalis)*, a sedentary species that has expanded its range northward in eastern North America in this century, indicates that the percentage of birds in their first breeding season was higher on the periphery of the species' range than within the center, and that birds bred on the margins of the range were more likely to be pioneers (Dow and Scott 1971). The relative lateness of the "spring" records also supports the theory that the birds are entering the state in a round about way from the east. The earliest

northern California record (May 17) is nearly two weeks later than the earliest Oregon record (May 5) listed by Gabrielson and Jewett (1940). It is interesting, however, that the two earliest spring records for northern California are from the foothills of the Sacramento Valley, west of the Sierran crest. These two records, taken in conjunction with the handful of other spring records from the Southwest, indicate that a very small number of Eastern Kingbirds may migrate north through the

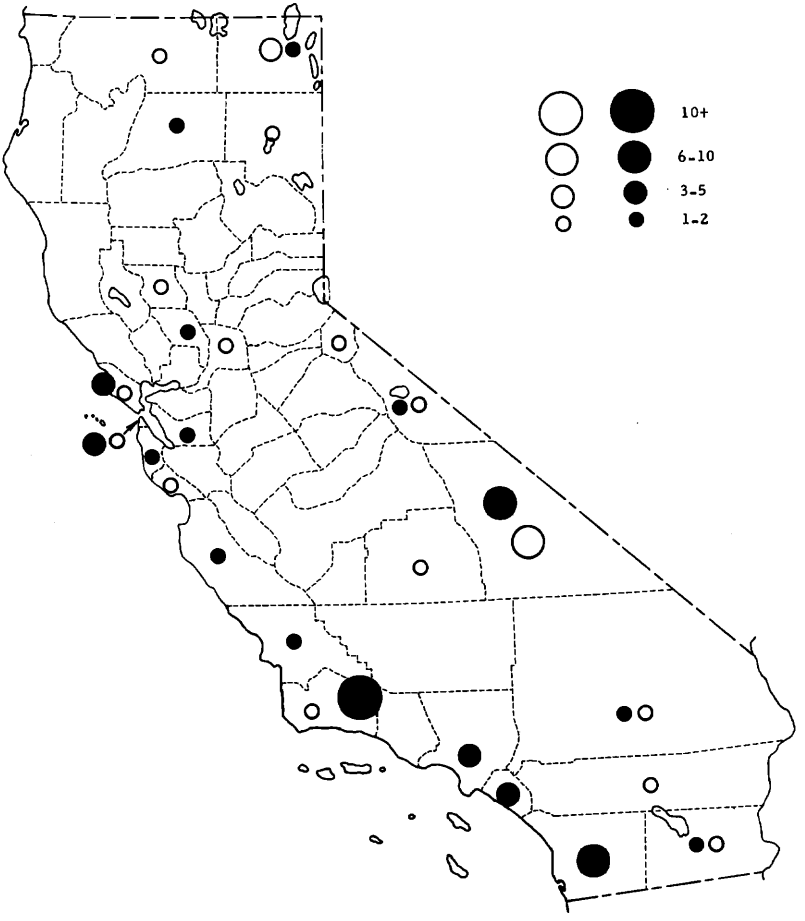

Figure 2. Distribution of California records of Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*) by counties. Open circles = spring or summer record. Solid circles = fall record. As might be expected, there is a lack of records from forested regions of the state.

Southwest in the spring, perhaps after having wintered in the range of the Western Kingbird (see discussion of fall migration).

By June of any year, then, a number of Eastern Kingbirds probably find their way to the eastern border of California. The habitats present there are similar to those in the established breeding range in Oregon, and most of these birds seem inclined to migrate no farther, considering the scarcity of June and July records west of the Sierra Nevada. If one of these birds is able to find a mate the pair will no doubt attempt to nest. The nesting record at Honey Lake and the other suspected California nestings indicate that this occasionally happens. In the Great Basin, suitable nest sites are not plentiful. Eastern Kingbirds strongly prefer to nest in the immediate vicinity of water. Fifty percent of 70 nests checked by Davis (1955) were at a mean height of 7m *over* water. The site preferred for nesting is a tree or large bush along a pond or stream. Such sites are naturally scarce in this region, but changes involved with the settlement of the area have included the creation of artificial ponds and stands of deciduous shade trees. It is possible that man's alteration of the landscape of the northern Great Basin in this fashion has allowed the breeding population of Eastern Kingbirds in this region to increase and extend its range westward. This is reported to be the case with the Bobolink *(Dolichonyx oryzivorus)* (Bent 1958). It is possible that the Eastern Kingbird will be found breeding elsewhere in northeastern California, and that it may eventually become an established breeding species in this part of the state.

FALL RECORDS

There are 60 records of Eastern Kingbirds, involving at least 65 individuals, for the months of August, September and October, prior to 1972 (see appendix). For my purposes, I will consider these records as migrants. However, the nesting record for Honey Lake, which is not included in this summary, indicates some of the records of Eastern Kingbirds in northeastern California in August may be of birds still on their breeding or summering grounds. These fall records are graphed in Figure 3. In cases where a bird remained at a given locality for more than a day, only the date on which the bird was first noted is used. Records of two or more birds present at the same place on the same day are considered one record.

The records for interior counties are scattered through August and the first half of September, with a slight peak in the second week of September. Along the coast from Marin County south we find the great

majority of fall records. The mean date for coastal records is 17 September, nearly two weeks later than the mean date for interior records (5 September).

Binford (1971), discussing the records of Northern Waterthrush *(Seiurus noveboracensis)* in California, proposed a theory in which two or more separate phenomena could account for the difference in the patterns of coastal and interior records for that species. These phenomena were (1) a regular migration along the eastern edge of California, and (2) a vagrant migration from the east, precipitating a few birds in the eastern counties in mid-September and a number of birds along the coast in September and October. While the data for the Eastern Kingbird, particularly in the interior, is regrettably meager, the traces of patterns present have some interesting parallels with patterns Binford (1971) noted for the waterthrush. Particularly striking is that for both species there is a two week difference in the mean date of occurrence in coastal versus interior counties.

DISCUSSION

Some of the coastal records, particularly those in late September and October, are probably of vagrants that have wandered considerably west of their usual migration paths and have been concentrated along the edge of the Pacific Ocean. A number of papers have recently dealt with possible reasons for this type of vagrancy, particularly among the Parulidae (McCaskie 1970, Bagg 1970, Austin 1971). Studies of fall vagrancy of any species of Tyrannidae, however, should take into account the well known tendency for some members of this family to wander north in the fall. The occurrence of Tropical Kingbirds *(T. melancholicus)* in coastal California is a good example. Perhaps any Eastern Kingbirds that wander north in the fall find it difficult to retrace the same paths southward.

The majority of interior records, as well as many of the early September and August records in coastal areas, may be due to a second phenomenon. Kingbirds are considered diurnal migrants (Van Tyne & Berger 1959), and like many other species that migrate by day, they are somewhat gregarious during migration. It is quite likely that they are influenced during migration by flocking behavior and topographic patterns to a greater extent than are night migrants. Gabrielson and Jewett (1940) note the intermixing of Eastern and Western Kingbirds in loose flocks of family groups in Oregon during August. In this situation it would seem possible for an Eastern to migrate south with a flock of

Westerns. Many summer records of Eastern Kingbirds in California, for example, no doubt pertain to summering, non-breeding individuals that might join a post-breeding group of Westerns. A number of the fall records from the southern coast and the interior, where Western Kingbirds are common migrants, tend to substantiate this theory. In the San Diego and Santa Barbara areas, a good number of the records of fall Eastern Kingbirds are of individuals associated with flocks or roosts of other kingbirds (Guy McCaskie, pers. comm.). Both of the author's two fall observations of this species in the interior involved an individual Eastern Kingbird associated with one or more Westerns.

If a few Eastern Kingbirds do wander south with Westerns in the fall, records from western Mexico would be expected. Friedmann et al. (1957) list none for the region, but there are at least two published sight records for Baja California (Grinnell 1928) and Chihuahua (Vuilleumier & Williams 1964). Both of these are August records, rather early in the season for out-of-range vagrants, but during the normal migration period of Western Kingbirds. Western Mexico is no doubt much less heavily birded in early fall than is the southern California coast. Even in the latter region, the Eastern Kingbird is decidely rare, being found less frequently than some other less conspicuous species, e.g., 46 coastal fall records versus 53 for the Northern Waterthrush (Binford 1971). In addition, observations of Eastern Kingbirds in western Mexico are much less likely to be published (as in *American*

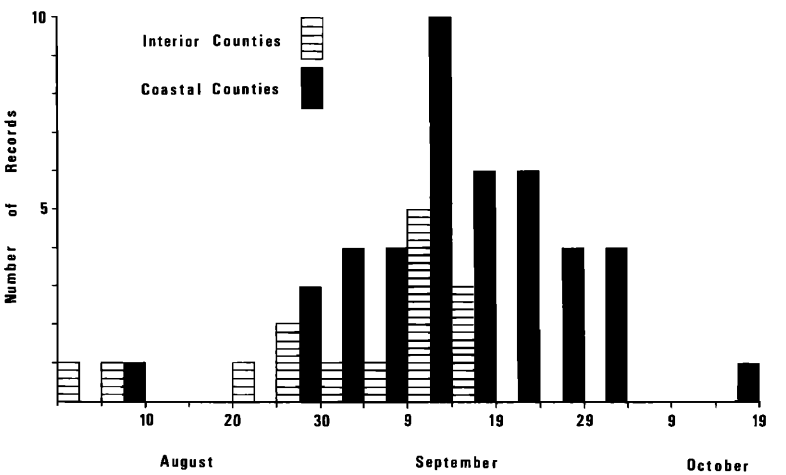

Figure 3. Distribution of fall records of Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*) in California plotted for five-day periods beginning with 1 August.

Birds) than are California observations. It is possible that a few Eastern Kingbirds could migrate south through western Mexico virtually undetected each fall. A few of these birds may even winter successfully with Western Kingbirds and attempt to retrace their paths northward in the spring, becoming a possible source for the few March, April and mid-May records in the Southwest as noted above.

SUMMARY

The first recorded successful nesting of the Eastern Kingbird in California is described. All other known records for the species in the state are analyzed. Late spring and summer records are believed to be of pioneers on the edge of the species' range, and this species is expected to be found breeding in California again. Fall records are felt to be the result of perhaps two phenomena, (1) off-course migration as a result of possible mis-orientation, and (2) inter-specific flocking behavior of kingbirds in the western portion of the Eastern Kingbird's range.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX

Records of Eastern Kingbird in California prior to 1972 are listed below chronologically by county. Counties are listed alphabetically. AFN and AB indicate Audubon Field Notes and American Birds, respectively.

Alameda Co.–1 Bay Farm Is. 23 Sept 1961 (Cutler and Pugh, AFN 16:71, 1962).

Alpine Co.–1 Woodford 29 July 1968 (Chandik and Baldridge, AFN 22:646, 1968).

Colusa Co.–1 vicinity Wilbur Springs 17 May 1963 (Mans and Chase, AFN 17:431, 1963).

Imperial Co.–1 south end Salton Sea 13 Sept 1964 (McCaskie and Pugh, AFN 19:80, 1965); 1 south end Salton Sea 4 August 1968 (McCaskie, AFN 23:109, 1969); 1 Brock Ranch 20 June 1970 (McCaskie, AFN 24:718, 1970).

Inyo Co.–1 Olancha 29 June 1891 (Fisher, N. Amer. Fauna 7:59, 1893); 1 Death Valley, 16 July 1935 (Gilman, Condor 38:41, 1936); 1 collected Furnace Creek Ranch 25 June 1961, in Death Valley Museum (Guy McCaskie, pers. comm.); 1 Deep Springs 15 July 1962 (Small, AFN 16:508, 1962); 1 Furnace Creek Ranch 15 Sept 1963 (McCaskie and Pugh, AFN 18:74, 1964); 2 Deep Springs 12 Sept 1964, 1 present next day (McCaskie and Pugh, AFN 19:80, 1965); 2 Deep Springs 11 Sept 1966, 1 present next day (McCaskie, AFN 21:78, 1967); 3 Furnace Creek Ranch 30 May 1969, 1 present next day (McCaskie, AFN 23:626, 1969); 1 Furnace Creek Ranch 30-31 August 1969 (McCaskie, AFN 24:100a, 1970); 2 Deep Springs 29 May 1970 (McCaskie, AFN 24:645, 1970); 1 Deep Springs 6 Sept 1971, 1 Scotty's Castle 11 Sept 1971 (McCaskie, AB 26:122, 1972).

Lassen Co.–Aside from the nesting record there is a record of 1 at Honey Lake 4 July 1964 (DeBenedictis and Chase, AFN 18:533, 1964).

Los Angeles Co.–1 collected Santa Monica 31 August 1895 (Grinnell, Pasadena Acad. Sci. Publ. 2:29, 1898); 1 Malibu 6 Sept 1968 (McCaskie, AFN 23:109, 1969); 1 Sepulveda Rec. Area 15 Sept 1969 (McCaskie, AFN 24:100a, 1970); 1 San Pedro 26 Sept 1970 (McCaskie, AB 25:109, 1971).

Marin Co.–1 Olema 5 Sept 1963, 1 Point Bonita 29 Sept 1963 (DeBenedictis & Chase, AFN 18:69, 1964); 1 Point Reyes 5 July 1964 (DeBenedictis & Chase, AFN 18:533, 1964); 2 Point Reyes 19 Sept 1967, 1 Point Reyes 3 October 1967 (Chandik & Baldridge, AFN 22:86, 1968).

Modoc Co.–1 vicinity Alturas 15 June 1912, 1 Eagleville 30 June 1912 (Dawson, Condor 18:27, 1916); 1 collected Eagleville 4 Sept 1926 (Mailliard, Proc. Calif. Acad. Sci., Ser. 4, 16:306, 1927); 1 Clear Lake N.W.R. 13 June 1965 (Edward J. O'Neill, pers. comm.).

Mono Co.–1 Mono Lake 19 July 1921 (Hoffmann, Condor 23:195, 1921); 1 Oasis 13 Sept 1967 (McCaskie, AFN 22:90, 1968).

Monterey Co.–1 Carmel River 21 Sept 1948 (Linsdale, AFN 3:31, 1949); 1 photographed Pacific Grove 21 Sept 1967 (Chandik & Baldridge, AFN 22:86, 1968).

Orange Co.–1 collected Laguna Beach 28 August 1917 (L. Miller, Condor 20:44, 1918); 1 Modjeska Canyon 13 Sept 1958 (Small, AFN 13:67, 1959); 1 photographed Dana Point 15-28 (or 18?) Sept 1964 (McCaskie and Pugh, AFN 19:80, 1965); 1 Laguna Beach 19-21 Sept 1969 (McCaskie, AFN 24:100a, 1970).

Riverside Co.–1 Sun City 30 June 1968 (McCaskie, AFN 22:649, 1968).

Sacramento Co.–1 vicinity of Folsom 24 May 1970 (Baldridge, Chandik and DeSante, AFN 24:640, 1970).

San Bernardino Co.–1 collected (No. 312 Cardiff Coll.) Bloomington 25 August 1947 (Hanna and Cardiff, Condor 50:46, 1948); 1 Morongo Valley 25-26 April 1959 (Small, AFN 13:402, 1959); 1 Morongo Valley 18 Sept 1971 (McCaskie, AB 26:122, 1972).

San Diego Co.–1 collected Oceanside 29 August 1961, 1 collected Solana Beach 28 Sept 1963 (McCaskie, Stallcup & DeBenedictis, Condor 69:85, 1967); 1 Solana Beach 27 August 1964, 1 Solana Beach 25 Sept-2 Oct 1964 (McCaskie and Pugh, AFN 19:80, 1965); 1 Imperial Beach 3 Oct 1965 (McCaskie, AFN 20:92, 1966); 1 Imperial Beach 11 Sept 1966 (McCaskie, AFN 21:78, 1967); 1 Imperial Beach 18-22 Sept 1967, 1 Point Loma 1 Oct 1967 (McCaskie, AFN 22:90, 1968); 1 Imperial Beach 2-3 Sept 1971 (McCaskie, AB 26:122, 1972).

San Francisco Co.–1 S.E. Farallon Is. sometime between 7 and 14 June 1967 (P.R.B.O. Annual Report, 1967); 1 banded S.E. Farallon Is. 26-27 June 1968 (fide Bob Stewart); 1 S.E. Farallon Is. 10 August 1968 (Chandik & Baldridge, AFN 22:646, 1968); 2 S.E. Farallon Is. 5 Sept 1969, 1 S.E. Farallon Is. 13-16 Sept 1969 (Baldridge, Chandik & DeSante, AFN 24:92, 1970).

San Luis Obispo Co.–1 Paso Robles 27 August 1965 (McCaskie, Stallcup & DeBenedictis, Condor 69:85, 1967); 1 collected Los Osos 9 Sept 1967 (McCaskie, AFN 22:90, 1968).

San Mateo Co.–1 Half Moon Bay 30 Sept 1961 (Cutler & Pugh, AFN 16:71, 1962).

Santa Barbara Co.–(All from Santa Barbara unless otherwise noted): 2, 13 Sept 1923 (Hoffman, Condor 26:75, 1924); 1 collected Gaviota 14 Sept 1937 (McLean, Condor 71:433, 1969); 1, 10 March 1959 (Small, AFN 13:402, 1959); 1, 14 Sept 1961 (Small, AFN 16:75, 1962); 1, 23-25 Sept 1962 (Small, AFN 17:69, 1963); 1, 24-26 Sept 1963 (McCaskie & Pugh, AFN 18:74, 1964); 2, 1-16 Sept 1964 (McCaskie & Pugh, AFN 19:80, 1965); 1, 10 Sept 1965 (McCaskie, AFN 20:92, 1966); 1, 13 Sept 1966 (McCaskie, AFN 21:78, 1967); 1 or 2, 18 Sept-4 Oct 1967 (McCaskie, AFN 22:90, 1968); 1 Sandyland 3 Sept 1968 (McCaskie, AFN 23:109, 1969); 1, 14 Sept 1969 (McCaskie, AFN 24:100a, 1970); 1, 11 Sept 1970 (McCaskie, AB 25:109, 1971); 1 22-28 Sept 1971, 1, Goleta 20 Oct 1971 (AB 26:122, 1972).

Santa Cruz Co.–1 Santa Cruz 30 July 1951 (Linsdale, AFN 5:307, 1951).

Shasta Co.–1 vicinity of Redding 19 Sept-5 Oct 1964 (DeBenedictis and Chase, AFN 19:74, 1965).

Siskiyou Co.–2 Big Sand Butte, vicinity of Lava Beds Nat'l. Mon. during June 1970 (Bob Edens, fide John Revill, pers. comm.).

Tulare Co.–1 Springville 6 June 1969 (Chandik and Baldridge, AFN 23:692, 1969).

Yolo Co.–1 vicinity Clarksburg 9 August 1968 (Chandik & Baldridge, AFN 22:646, 1968).

In addition, the following records, vague as to place and/or date, were not included in the analysis of records: 1 Santa Barbara in late August 1961 (Small, AFN 15:493, 1961); 1 Gaviota, Santa Barbara Co. in Sept 1931 (McLean, Condor 71:433, 1969); 1 vicinity Little Lake (county?) during early October 1955 (Small, AFN 10:58, 1956).

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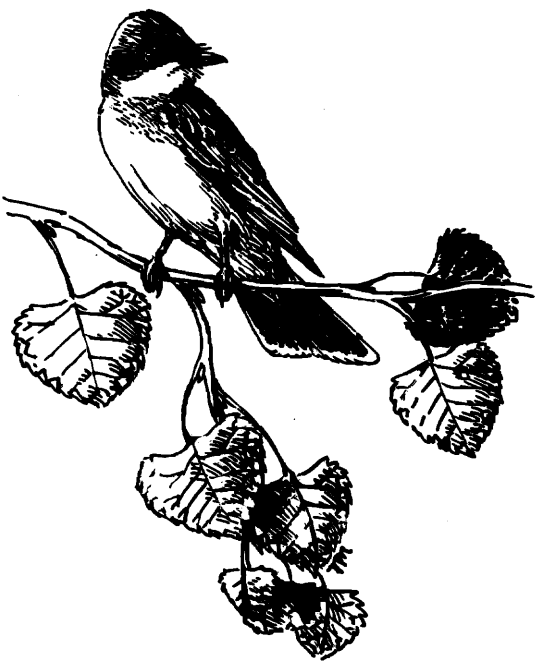

Sketch by Tim Manolis