



Brunswick Wildlife Extreme Vagrancy

It was Tuesday morning and I had not selected a topic for my weekly story when a topic suddenly selected me. My old fax printer went belly up and I was headed out the door to buy a new one. Just as I pocketed my wallet and keys from the kitchen table, I glimpsed bird activity in the backyard and paused to take a look. I saw a flycatcher possibly of the *Myiarchus* genus. WOW!

At first glance I thought the bird an Eastern Phoebe, a relative flycatcher...one that winters in our area. Quickly I realized it was an Ash-throated Flycatcher a species from the southwest.

My Ash-throated turned out to be a “one-hour wonder”. I watched it for fifteen minutes, taking photos within twenty-five feet. I then left to buy the printer; however, before leaving home I sent an e-mail to our Carolina’s birding hot line, letting anyone know they were invited to stop and look for the bird, one that I did not expect it to stay long.

When I returned, I was joined by two great local birders and we could not find it even though we scoured the neighborhood, upsetting my neighbors who thought we were casing the area. Scruffy guys driving slowly by with binoculars and cameras and walking around looking at each house’s trees and shrubs. Did not bother us...we had bail money.

This bird was a true rarity! Since 1973 there have been only ten records for Ash-throated Flycatchers in North Carolina and my visitor is the first reported in the Lower Cape Fear. The last sighting was at Fort Macon near Morehead City in 2004.

This Western Kingbird, the other featured vagrant, is one I photographed at Sutton Lake last November. Not as rare as the flycatcher, a few kingbirds stray to the south Atlantic Coast in fall. We generally have one or two annual sightings in the Lower Cape Fear. I was fortunate that my kingbird stayed around three days so other birders could see and photograph it.

Both species look somewhat similar and have some similarities in behavior and diet. Both are members of the same sub-family of the larger *Tyrannidae* family commonly known as tyrant flycatchers. While the flycatcher is in the genus *Myiarchus*, the kingbird is a member of *Tyrannus*.

Our region's comparable *Tyrannidae* species are the Great Crested Flycatcher and Eastern Kingbird. Both breed in our area and migrate south plus another member of the family, the Eastern Phoebe, overwinters here in good numbers.

The Ash-throated Flycatcher ranges across western North America from central Texas to California, as far north as central Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado, and south to Mexico. Ash-throated Flycatchers begin to migrate south during late summer and early fall and have usually departed the United States by mid-September. Unless they head east!

The Ash-throated occurs in a variety of low- to mid-elevation habitats including desert thorn scrub: open deciduous, coniferous, and mixed woodlands; and riparian forest. Since they tolerate high temperatures, can go without water by substituting fluids of their prey, and need small cavities they can breed in desert thorn scrub

The Western Kingbird breeds in most of the western United States up to Canada and it overwinters in southern Mexico and Central America. Populations are increasing slightly across most of its breeding range. Its range has expanded gradually since the late nineteenth century due to actions of settlers. For example, the kingbird was able to spread eastward across the northern mixed-grass prairies because settlers planted trees. Also, range expansion in Texas was made possible by forest clearing and the proliferation of telephone poles and wires.

The kingbird is a little less a habit specialist than the flycatcher. It occupies a variety of habitats including riparian forests, woodlands, savannahs, scrub lands, agricultural fields, deserts, and urban areas...its better adapted to living with humans.

An extreme vagrant is a wandering bird far outside its normal migration range. Scientific theories explaining extreme vagrancy include weather events such as hurricanes and strong cold fronts that drastically alter the course of migrating birds. Scientists also believe that a mirror-image disorientation may be involved, a theory that better explains why the opposite effect takes place and eastern birds show up on the west coast during migration. Finally, they believe there is a genetic component to extreme vagrancy...a mutation that causes a bird to migrate in a new direction from the one dictated by its DNA.

Though they may seem lost, if vagrants survive, they may start a new sub-population that always returns to the new wintering ground. At the very least, they are imprinted on and generally return to their new winter home. Vagrants once thought of as dead-enders may prove in the end to have been pioneers.

This year I have seen a Lark Sparrow, another western species, near the NC Aquarium for the second straight year. There is a good chance it is the same bird because of site fidelity to its winter home based on imprinting. Generally the first year the wanderer is just that.

Afterwards, though the bird is far out of range, it is not a vagrant since it is now programmed to return.

In a previous article, I discussed how leaving hummingbird feeders out during winter might attract a western vagrant hummer. A couple of weeks ago, a Buff-bellied Hummingbird usually found in Mexico and the Lower Rio Grand Valley showed up at a feeder in Arapahoe near New Bern. Turns out this lucky birder scored a state record! Maybe the next state record will be found in your backyard! Regardless of records, you may be able to enjoy the western bird year after year.

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