

Acadian Flycatcher: King of the Forest

Empidonax virescens

By Matthew Daw

When walking through a moist forest in the east there are many intriguing birds you may come across. One of them is the Acadian Flycatcher. Its distinctive song, a loud explosive spit-chee alerts you to its presence. The Acadian Flycatcher flies off its perch to catch an insect flying through the woods and returns to another perch 20 feet off. This behavior is typical of this bird. It is fond of beech trees, and indeed often nests in these trees. It is also found in heavily wooded deciduous forests, hemlock forests, wooded swamps, and riparian thickets. In the uplands, it is also found in wooded ravines but it favors deciduous floodplain forests throughout much of its range.

It is a common summer resident throughout much of its range, but is more common in the southeast. It is the most southerly breeding empid in the US; breeding from northern Florida north to the Great Lakes, Wisconsin and Southern New Hampshire, west to eastern Minnesota, Eastern Kansas and central Texas.

A relatively large empid, at 5.75 inches, it is long-winged and long-billed. It has contrasting wing-bars and eye-rings like most empids but is greener above with larger bill. It can easily be confused with the Eastern Wood-pewee, Willow, Alder or Yellow-bellied Flycatchers. It is whitish below with a yellowish tinge and has gray legs. Its lower mandible is almost entirely pinkish-yellow and its eye-ring is narrow, sharply-defined and yellowish or white. It has dark wings with white or, on fall immatures, buffy wing-bars. It has a pale grayish throat and a pale olive-green wash across the upper breast.

This bird reaches the southern parts of its range in late March or April and usually leaves in September into early October, it is rare after October in the United States. It winters from Panama to Ecuador and Venezuela in lowland tropical forests and second growth.

This bird usually starts building its saucer-shaped nest in April to June and lays its eggs between May and July. Its nest is thin and durable, made of Spanish moss near the coast, hemlock twigs and lichens in the mountains and fine grasses, rootlets, and bark elsewhere. It is usually suspended across the fork of a downward-hanging limb of a large tree, preferably beech, often (or even mostly) over water and seldom more than 10 or 12 feet high. It is lined with grass, hair and/or plant down, often quite messy, with grass or Spanish moss hanging down from the cup. The bottom is often camouflaged with faded tree blossoms or bud scales bound on with spider or caterpillar silk.

The 3-4 (range 1-4) creamy eggs are marked at the large end with a wreath of reddish-brown spots and require 13-14 days for incubation. Young are born helpless with some white down and remain in the nest for about 2 weeks. Both parents help build the nest but only the female incubates the eggs, indeed one of the only times that you can tell the gender of an individual of this species besides singing males! Fairly shy, the female will often slip off the nest at the approach of an intruder. The male helps feed the young and young fledged in the summer look like adults in the fall except for buffy wing-bars and extensive yellow on underparts.

This empid flycatches for flying insects in larger trees than other empids and sticks to the middle-levels or forest canopy rather than the edge or brush. Like most empids, it is best identified by song and habitat.

Its song, a loud explosive spit-chee, with second syllable accented, higher than first and superficially similar to the red-eyed Vireo. It is generally given 2-4 times a minute and is very

distinctive. The female may also use the same call in stressful situations, such as when disturbed from its nest or after being released from a mist nest. Its call is a loud sharp peek and a thin peet; in migration, also a sharp pseet.

On breeding grounds, males give a distinctive pwi-pwi-pwi-pwi-pwi-pwi, flicker-like but softer and given in flight, when it sounds like loud wingbeats. This usually solitary bird has a weak fluttering flight with shallow wing beats on rapidly beating wings. It is a frequent host to cowbird parasitism, which generally parasitize nests in smaller woodlots rather than large tracts of forest. The frequency of parasitism is lower than for other birds in the same forest, the Acadian Flycatcher is not a very good host, as only 19% of the cowbird young fledge successfully.

This bird generally forages in the shade of thick trees, and indeed it would seem out of place in bare forests. It often droops its wings and does minimum wing and tail flicking. It has a broad tail and a peak at the back of the head. It is the least likely of all eastern empids to stray to the west, but is expanding its range northeast. Its migration is mostly trans-Gulf and its population is stable.

This bird is monotypic and its scientific name, Mosquito King, widely misses the mark in describing the bird's feeding habits. But it is an apt description of the small size of a flycatcher that lords over a realm of small insects.

Curiously, no information exists of the ability of the Acadian Flycatcher to walk or hop, even though it occasionally forages on the ground. It is an excellent flyer though, able to hover and even fly backwards! It has been observed bathing, not by standing in water, but by diving into the water from above, hitting the water with its chest, and then returning to perch to preen and shake.

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References

Potter, Eloise F., et al. *Birds of the Carolinas*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.