

Third Place Writing – Age 10-13
Matthew Daw – Raleigh, NC

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*)

This graceful and beautiful bird is a common denizen of open fields in the southern plains. It is found in prairies, open fields, or any open country with scattered trees and shrubs where it gracefully catches flying insects from a prominent perch, its long, scissor-like tail streaming along behind it. It is often found along roadsides or in towns, airports, graveyards or parking lots. This is a great thing, as it is one of the most attractive birds of North America. Driving through open country in Texas, Oklahoma, or another state that it occupies, you can easily see 150-200 in a single day of driving. It often perches on power lines and fence-posts, and is easy to observe, often allowing you to approach closely.

The adult is medium-sized, from 10 inches for a female, up to 15 inches for a long-tailed male, and usually weighs about 1.5 ounces. It is a striking bird, with a very long, forked tail. It has a very pale pearly gray head and back, with a salmon-pink wash on whitish belly, flanks, sides, and underwing coverts, dark black-brown wings with white edges, bright red axillaries, a red crown patch that's rarely visible, black legs, feet, and bill, and a slight dark eyeline. In flight the white outer tail feathers contrast sharply with its black inner tail feathers and upperwing. The undertail is white with black on the inside edge, and the tail of the female and immature is shorter than that of the male.

The immature can be mistaken with a Western Kingbird, but note longer, forked tail, lack of pure yellow tones on underparts, and pale gray back and head. Although improbable, adults can be mistaken with escaped whydahs, or a vagrant Fork-tailed Flycatcher. It has also been known to hybridize with the Western Kingbird.

It lives mostly on insects caught in flight from a prominent perch. It watches for flying insects such as bees, wasps, beetles, grasshoppers and others, then sallies out to intercept it, hovering briefly before dipping to pick it up, often returning to the same perch. It often perches close to the ground, searching for crickets and grasshoppers on the ground or in their short flights, picking them out of the air very acrobatically. I think that it feeds on the ground more than most people think; it often drops to the ground to secure or devour its food. By the end of summer, its tail is often worn from friction with the ground.

The courtship flight is one of the most impressive of North American birds although I have never witnessed it. From a hundred feet up, the male suddenly plunges downward for about a fourth of the distance, banking upward into a zigzag flight, while emitting a trilling cackle. After several of these zigzags, he then flies straight upwards and falls over backwards, completing three or so backwards somersaults, displaying its long streaming tail and bright red axillaries. It may repeat this "Sky dance" until the eggs are hatched.

Like kingbirds, it is aggressive and will readily chase away a bird of any size. It is named for the way it opens and closes, its tail, and when perched, its “scissors” are closed. This monotypic flycatcher has a light, buoyant flight with shallow wingbeats.

They are usually found in pairs or small groups, and at night they roost communally (except nesting females) in groups that may number more than 200. In late summer, they may form flocks in cotton fields and prairies preparatory for migration that may number more than 1,000. It migrates by day in small to large flocks.

Its song is similar to the Western Kingbird, but simpler, lower and flatter, “pikik pik pik pik piDEEK.” It also emits a variety of kingbird-like bickering and sputtering note series. Its common call is a relatively low, flat “pik” and a repeated “ka-lup.”

It builds its bulky, cup-shaped, often messy nest in trees, shrubs, or man-made structures 7-40 feet off the ground, not usually being picky as there is often a lack of suitable nesting sites in its habitat. Arthur Cleveland Bent writes that he saw one attempting to build a nest on the wings of a windmill that was in active use: “The location would have been satisfactory if the wings had been stationary, but unfortunately they were never still for any great length of time. Each time that the windmill went into action the nest was destroyed; but the flycatchers were not dismayed, and started each time to rebuild it.”(1)

The nest is lined with twigs, weeds, rootlets, grasses, hairs and often a surprising amount of artificial material; rags, twine, bits of paper, carpet fuzz, and cigarette filters being commonly used materials. The 3-6 eggs (most commonly 5) are laid one a day and incubated 14 to 17 days by the female. The altricial young stay in the nest 14-16 days, and they are fed by both parents. It is a solitary monogamous nester, and produces one brood yearly. It is a rare host to cowbirds. Its ovate to rounded ovate eggs are creamy white with reddish, brown, olive or gray blotches and measure .9 by .6 inches.

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher’s breeding range ranges from eastern New Mexico, far southeastern Colorado, north to far southern Nebraska, central and southeast Kansas, central Missouri, central Arkansas, western Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas west to Pecos, and northern Mexico. In spring it arrives from mid-March to early-April; migration peaks April to early May; straggler to June. Fall migration begins early August, peaks mid-September to early October, stragglers into November. In the winter, the species is found north (rarely) to southern and gulf coast Texas and extreme southwest Louisiana, southern Florida, south through eastern Mexico, western Chiapas, western Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama. It migrates through Mexico and in small numbers along the Gulf Coast to Florida. It is a casual visitor to almost anywhere in the United States and southern Canada, with many records outside its normal range; I personally have seen a family group that had nested in the North Carolina sandhills region.

Its population is stable, gradually expanding north and east, although it is declining slightly in Oklahoma.

This is a beautiful bird and a great bird to show people that aren't birders. I saw hundreds of them on a recent trip to Texas, and I never tired of watching them, their tails streaming behind them gracefully.

References

(1) Bent, Arthur Cleveland, *Life Histories of North American Flycatchers, Larks, Swallows, and Their Allies*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963