

Status and Occurrence of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) is one of North America's most elegant and spectacular looking passerine species. The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher breeds from southeastern Colorado, to southeastern New Mexico, southern Nebraska, southwestern Missouri, western Arkansas, and western Louisiana south through southern Texas (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The species also breeds in Mexico in northern Coahuila, central Nuevo León, and northern Tamaulipas (Howell and Webb 2010). There are isolated breeding records as far east as South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia with additional reports of breeding from Tennessee, Indiana, Mississippi, and Iowa (Regosin 2013). There is also a recent record of a female Scissor-tailed Flycatcher that was paired and bred with a Western Kingbird in southeastern California (Small 1994). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is a migratory species that winters from southern Mexico through central Costa Rica, rarely to western Panama (Regosin 2013). There are also regular winter records from southern Florida (Regosin 2013).

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is a regular wanderer throughout all of eastern and western North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Regosin 2013). Along the west coast, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is an annual species in California and is not on the State review List (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, there are 18 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012), in Washington there are 8 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012) and there are 4 records for southeastern Alaska (Roberson 1980, Gibson *et al.* 2008). In British Columbia, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is a casually occurring species with over 30 records coming from scattered locations from all over the Province (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). Well suited to life in open grasslands, it eats mostly grasshoppers (*Orthoptera*) and beetles (*Coleoptera*), more so than other North American flycatchers (Regosin 2013). Although this species shares many similarities with other kingbirds in the genus *Tyrannus*, only the Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed (*Tyrannus savana*) flycatchers have dramatically elongated tail-feathers (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is covered in all standard field guides for North America. This species is very distinct and should not be difficult for observers to identify if it is encountered. The following breakdown of feather molt and identification of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is taken from Regosin (2013), which was primarily based on the detailed plumage descriptions of Ridgway (1907), Oberholser (1974), and Pyle (1997a). The sexes are similar in

appearance in all plumages although they differ in the morphology of the outer rectrices and the primary feathers. The definitive plumage of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is assumed at the second basic plumage stage.

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher holds its juvenile or first basic plumage primarily from June through to August. It is similar in appearance to a definitive basic female-plumaged bird, but the crown lacks a concealed spot of white and orange with the back, hindneck, head, wings, and tail appearing browner and duller. The upperwing coverts are fringed a pale whitish colour resulting in a scaly appearance. The orange or red patch on side of breast is lacking. The underwing lining, sides, flanks, and abdomen are a pale cream buff-colour. The body feathers, especially the undertail coverts, are longer. The tail length is influenced by the bird's sex with the outer rectrix feathers measuring 100-130 mm in females, and 125-155 mm in the males. The outer primary feathers are blunt without a distinct notch shape (Pyle 1997a). The males and females are similar in plumage, but show noticeable differences in tail length and in their outer primary feather shape with the males showing a slightly more pointed tip to the feathers. On juvenile birds the bill is copper-coloured and the legs are copper red on the nestlings (Oberholser 1974).

The term "first basic" or "basic I" plumage according to Humphrey and Parkes (1959) and later authors is a molt that is present primarily from September to March. The body plumages of both sexes are similar to the definitive basic female. This plumage is distinguished from definitive basic plumage by the molt limits and characters among upperwing and tail feathers. Before the primary molt is completed, which is usually between the months of February through April, the outer primaries are as blunt as in juvenile plumage. The primary feather shape resembles that of definitive basic plumage after the molt has completed. The juvenile outer rectrices are retained, and are shorter than in definitive basic plumage and are determined by the sex of the bird. Following pre-formative molt, the molt limits occur between the juvenile outer secondaries and inner primaries in central area of wing, varying from 7 to 14 feathers, and fresher, replaced formative inner secondaries and outer primaries. Most or all the juvenile primary coverts are retained, are narrower, browner in colour, and have broad pale fringes when these fringes are not worn off. These feathers contrast with the newer greater covert feathers. On the adult Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, the bill is a dark brown colour that is lighter in colour at the base, particularly on the lower mandible (Oberholser 1974). The eyes of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher are dark brown (Oberholser 1974). The legs are also a dull brown (Oberholser 1974).

First and definitive alternate plumages are present primarily between the months of March to August. These plumages are similar in appearance to formative and definitive basic plumages, respectively, but tertial feathers 1-3 that can include 3-5 inner greater coverts are replaced, contrasting with the remainder of the retained formative or basic upperwing feathers. The criteria to separate first alternate plumages from definitive alternate plumages in both sexes is similar to that described under formative and definitive basic plumages, with molt contrasts in the wing more pronounced due to the accelerated rates of wear to the juvenile feathers as compared with the basic feathers.

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher holds definitive basic plumage primarily during the months September to March. The male is identified by a pale neutral gray colour found on the head, nape, and sides of neck. The lores are a darker dusky gray colour with the crown having a concealed spot of orange red to scarlet, surrounded by white. The back and scapulars are a brownish pale-neutral gray colour, washed with a tawny coloration. The rump is a fuscous or brownish-gray colour with the uppertail coverts also a fuscous colour with gray margins. The longest coverts are black, edged with a pale brownish-white colour. The tail is long with the outer rectrix feather length varying between 190–265 mm. The rectrices become progressively longer from the innermost (R1) to the outermost (R6); the six inner rectrices (R1-R3 on each side) are black, and margined terminally with grayish-brown or white colour. The six outer rectrices (R4-R6) are white, and are broadly tipped with black, but edged narrowly with white. The black occupies the terminal quarter to a third of the 6th rectrix feather. The dorsal surface of the folded tail appears mostly black in colour, with white margins. The ventral surface appears mostly white in colour. The wings are brown or dusky in colour with the upperwing and secondary coverts edged with a grayish-white colour. The primaries are very narrowly edged on the outer web with a light gray colour when the feathers are new. The outer primary feather (P10) is deeply notched, with the notch extending 19–22 mm from the feather tip. The cheek, chin, and throat are white in colour with the breast having a very pale gray coloration. The sides and flanks are a light to dark salmon pink colour. The undertail coverts are similar, but paler and more pinkish. The axillary patch is bright scarlet red. The female is similar in appearance to the definitive basic male, but the overall plumage coloration is duller, particularly on the sides, flanks, and on the undertail coverts, which are a paler salmon colour to almost a pale orange buff colour. The axillary patches are smaller, less intensely red and more orange. The concealed crown-spot is a duller orange colour and smaller in overall size to the male. The tail is shorter with the outer rectrix feathers varying in size between 145-182 mm. The notch on the outer primary feather is shallower, usually measuring between 10-15 mm from the feather tip (Pyle 1997a).

Any Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in definitive basic plumage is separated from its formative plumage by the uniformity of the quality and freshness of the wing and tail feathers, especially among all the secondary and primary feathers. The upperwing primary coverts are duskier, with little or no pale fringing, not contrasting in feather quality with the outer greater coverts. The tail of the female Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is smaller than on the male.

In flight, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is both graceful and buoyant. When flycatching, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher will take long sortie flights where it open and closes its tail like a pair of scissors (Regosin 2013). This flight characteristic is carried-out by all ages of this species and should be very obvious to any observer (Regosin 2013).

Occurrence and Documentation

There is probably no species more sought after by observers in British Columbia than the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher because it is such a spectacular-looking species that can turn up anywhere in the Province. There are 34 Provincial records of this majestic bird with records being reported from almost every region of British Columbia except for the Queen Charlotte Islands (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1).

The number of records for the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in British Columbia is mostly clustered in the months of May and June (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1 & 2). This pattern of vagrancy mirrors California where there are over 100 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee with the bulk of the State's records coming from these two months (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is an annual species throughout California, and as a result, the species was dropped as a review species by the California Bird Records Committee after 1997 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is a species that breeds early in the spring in the Deep South (Regosin 2013). Birds that are found in British Columbia are either post breeding birds or young birds that are on the move (Regosin 2013). As a result of this fact most observations of this species are one-day-wonders (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). This species is notorious for being in a location one day and gone the next (Regosin 2013). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher likes to forage on insects in open field habitats; consequently it is not surprising that many records in the Province come from agricultural areas or airports (Regosin 2013, (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). There are 15 records for British Columbia that come from the interior of the Province (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). These observations are from as far north as the Liard area of the Peace River region and as far to the east as the Creston Valley (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). There are 8 records for the Scissor-tailed flycatcher in the Lower Mainland and Upper Fraser Valley area (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Toochin *et al.* 2014d), with 4 of these coming from the Hope area (Campbell *et al.* 1997,

Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Like interior Provincial observations, the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers found in the Lower Mainland and surrounding areas have been found in open agricultural habitats or at airports (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). Almost all of these birds were seen for only one day or two at the most (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). On Vancouver Island, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher has been found 10 times from all corners of the Island (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014e, see Table 1). Unlike with other regions of British Columbia, most birds were found along beaches and near the water (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, Toochin *et al.* 2014e, see Table 1). There are a few sightings in agricultural habitats, but unlike other regions of British Columbia, on Vancouver Island most birds are found flycatching on driftwood near the ocean (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, Toochin *et al.* 2014e, see Table 1). There is also a record from Port Neville across from the mid-northern section of Vancouver Island, but on the Mainland side of the Georgia Strait (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). There are very few fall records in British Columbia for the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and, to date, no late November records or early winter records (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is a species that is obvious and can often be found by non-birders since it is so distinctive. Due to its habit of sitting on wires and out in the open, it is highly likely there will be more records in the Province of this charismatic species in the future.



Figure 1: Record #30: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew on May 21, 2008.
Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 2 & 3: Record #30: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew on May 24, 2008.
Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 4: Record #30: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew on May 24, 2008.
Photo © Louis Haviland.



Figure 5: Record #30: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew on May 26, 2008.
Photo © Louis Haviland.

Table 1: Records of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult May 24, 1964: Enderby (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 2.(1) immature August 31, 1966: (BC Photo 508) near Cottonwood House on Barkerville Road (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 3.(1) adult June 2, 1967: Saltspring Island (Roberts 1967, Crowell and Nehls 1968, Tatum 1971, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 4.(1) adult October 8-10, 1967: Mr. Hotchkiss, mobs (BC Photo 100) Victoria International Airport, North Saanich (Stirling 1968, Crowell and Nehls 1968, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 5.(1) immature September 23, 1968: 5km east of Grand Forks (Millican 1969)
(1) immature October 10, 1968: R. Walker, mobs: 3km east of Grand Forks (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 6.(1) adult May 20, 1972: north west of Trail (Roberson 1980)
- 7.(1) adult May 14-17, 1973: Bob Greyell (BC Photo 289) near Airport, Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 8.(1) adult June 7, 1974: Port Neville (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 9.(1) adult June 16-26, 1978: Airport fields around, Kamloops (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 10.(1) adult July 11, 1978: feeding on top of Spruce Trees at the junction of the Liard and Coal Rivers (Campbell 1978, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 11.(1) adult June 1, 1984: Jack Delair: Hope Airport (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 12.(1) adult May 22-23, 1985: Jack Delair: Hope Airport (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 13.(1) adult May 27, 1986: (BC Photo 1085) near Duck Lake, Wynndel (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 14.(1) ad May 16-18, 1987: Adrian Dorst, mobs (BC Photo 1155) Long Beach, Pacific Rim National Park (Campbell 1987, Mattocks and Harrington-Tweit 1987, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 15.(1) adult June 26, 1989: farmland at Mound Valley, 5km north of Clinton (Campbell 1989, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 16.(1) immature October 5, 1991: Phil Gehlen: east of Mt. Lehman Road, flew over Highway 1 (Dorsey 1996a, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 17.(1) adult July 18, 1992: Don Cecile Port Alberni (Siddle 1993, Davidson 1993, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 18.(1) adult June 10, 1993: (videotaped) Tumbler Ridge (Bain and Holder 1993, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 19.(1) immature female June 16, 1993: John Luce, Tom Plath, mobs (photo) Causeway of Sea & Iona Island, Richmond (Davidson 1994, Dorsey 1996b, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 20.(1) immature male July 1, 1994: *fide Dennis Knopp*: Skagit Valley Provincial Park (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 21.(1) adult male May 12, 1995: *fide Dennis Knopp*: Skagit Valley Provincial Park (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 22.(1) adult male June 29, 1996: Frank Peirpoint-Allen: Serpentine Fen, Surrey (Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 23.(1) adult July 13, 1997: Elsie Stanley: McBride (Bowling 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 24.(1) adult July 19, 1998: C. Antoniazzi, mobs: 40 km east of Prince George, at school in Giscome (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)

- 25.(1) adult male May 31, 2000: Dianna Koo: 1509 Celeste Crescent, Mary Hill, Port Coquitlum (Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 26.(1) immature August 24, 2003: Jackie Windh: Tofino (Cecile 2004, Toochin *et al.* 2014e)
(1) immature September 2, 2003: Brian Slater, and other observers Ucluelet (Cecile 2004, Toochin *et al.* 2014e) (same bird as above)
- 27.(1) adult May 9, 2004: Marc-Andre Beaucher, mobs: Creston Area (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 28.(1) adult June 28, 2004: *fide Adrian Dorst*: Florencia Bay, Pacific Rim National Park (Toochin *et al.* 2014e)
- 29.(1) juvenile October 7, 2006: Ed and Hazel Beynon: Westside, just across Okanagan Lake from Kelowna (Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 30.(1) adult male July 7, 2007: Cathy Sweet, mobs (video) Sackner Road, Vanderhoof (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 31.(1) adult male May 19-25, 2008: Jason Spears, and other observers (photo) Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew (Cecile 2008, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 32.(1) adult male June 2, 2008: Jan Leina Nootka Island, west coast of Vancouver Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014e) [likely same bird as above]
- 33.(1) adult female June 28, 2011: Jerry Etzkorn: Carmanah Point (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 34.(1) adult male June 2-3, 2014: Tom Maxie (photo) near San Joseph Bay, near Cape Scott, Vancouver Island (R. Cannings pers. comm.)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher records in British Columbia:

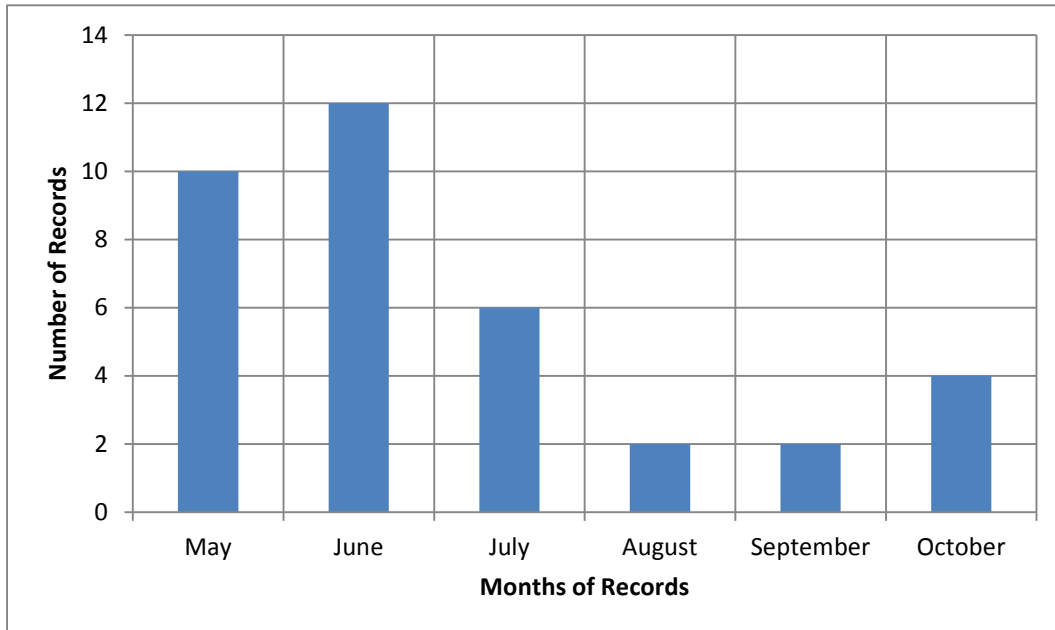


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the spring and summer of this species with May and June having the highest number of records.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Barbara McKee for reviewing the manuscript. We also wish to thank Russell Cannings for details on the Cape Scott record. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law.

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