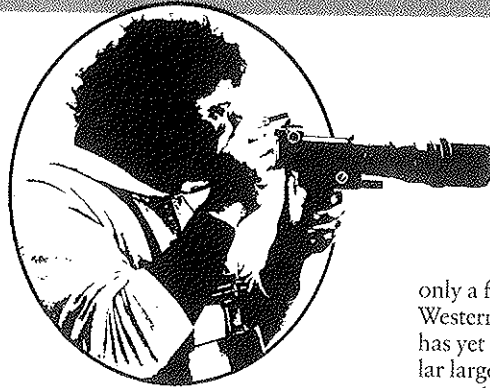


# Flitty Little Flycatchers

(THE NOTORIOUS EMPIDONAX)

Rich Stallcup



IN HIS FIRST *Field Guide to Western Birds*, Roger Tory Peterson paraphrased Ludlow Griscom, the dean of unarmed field ornithology in the U.S., by saying, "Collecting has proven that it is nearly impossible to name many individuals in the field, even in the spring, so the wise field man usually lets most of them go just as Empidonaxes." That was in 1969. Today, there are many people across the country who routinely and correctly identify most individuals, even silent migrants and out-of-range individuals. In fact, there are probably more Empidonax-friendly observers today than there are ones who would risk using the term "field man."

During the 1970s and 1980s, a renaissance in field identification of North American birds took place, and although Dr. Peterson's advice was wise at the time and should be used by many today, anyone who wishes to make the effort can tame the notorious Empidonax.

The key to understanding these birds is to know that, in most cases, several characteristics must be noted before identification can be clinched. In descending order of value, such characters are listed here: call note, song, bill size and shape, head-tail proportions,

eyering, behavior, winter habitat, and plumage. The reason plumage comes in last is that worn birds and those in fresh feather of the same species may be different colors and have different patterns: such variation can be greater within a single species than between certain pairs of species! Since song, distribution, and nesting habitat are covered elsewhere, they won't be here. Besides, we don't have enough space.

Instead we will try to encapsulate some of the most useful information for the Empidonax species that occur regularly in California. Keith's excellent illustrations clearly depict some of the subtle differences.

**GEOGRAPHICAL DEFAULT.** Unless it just won't fit, it is best to assume that any individual bird is the expected sort. Even at vagrant traps (where lost birds congregate), the geographically expected choice is nearly always correct over a rare look-alike congener. Since Alder Flycatcher has yet to be accepted as occurring in California, call one that looks like a Willow, a Willow. Since Yellow-bellied Flycatcher has been recorded

only a few times, call one that looks like a Western, a Western. Since Acadian Flycatcher has yet to be found here, consider all the regular large-billed species before embarrassing yourself. Once you are thoroughly familiar with the regulars it is time to tackle the unexpected.

**DIAGNOSTIC SINGLE FEATURES.** Though in most cases a combination of several characteristics will have to be compiled to make an identification, there are a few single-feature traits by which a bird may be named. Tail movement, a trait common to all Empidonax, is always a variation on an upward flick, except in the *Gray Flycatcher* whose tail motion is down or forward. Also, the tail of Gray appears less rigid than the others' tails, flopping in the breeze as though it might blow off. Any Empidonax in the far West with a yellow throat may quite safely be called a *Western Flycatcher*; one with an obscure or missing eyering should be a *Willow Flycatcher*. The call notes of Western and Hammond's are theirs alone.

**HABITAT PREFERENCES.** Migrants and wintering birds (usually in Mexico) show habitat preferences as do breeders (not addressed here). Where these habitats are available, Westerns and Hammond's like thick woodlots over dry ground; Willows and Least's like open areas bordering woods or



Western Flycatcher on coast redwood (with the bird's lower mandible shown in back).

Willow Flycatcher on willow.

Hammond's Flycatcher on white fir.

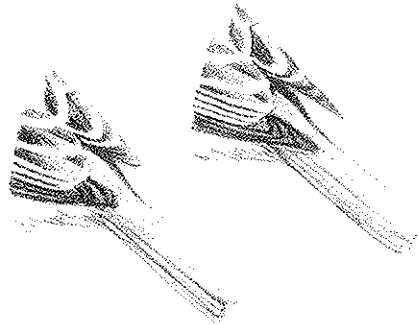
damp marshy areas; Dusky and Grays like dry open shrubland. Obviously, migrants that need to plop down for refueling may have to settle for less than optimum places.

#### Brief Summaries

**T**HE FOLLOWING THOUGHTS concern flycatchers in fairly fresh plumage (most birds usually are), because adults before autumn molt may be ratted-out and colorless. For all individuals, features other than feathers — including voice — are more useful for identification.

**WESTERN FLYCATCHER** is usually an easy call, with its yellow throat, broadly yellow underparts, green back, bold almond-shaped eyering, and large spade-like bill that is mostly orange ventrally. It is very active, often jerking up the tail, usually in concert with staccato wing flicks; the wings seem to shiver back to closed position. Legs and feet of Western Flycatchers are gray, especially in young birds. Legs and feet of the other species are black. Yellow-bellied Flycatcher of the East is the most similar; if the wings are strikingly black, begin considering that. (See "Oh, No!" below.)

**WILLOW FLYCATCHER**, too, is an easy call for you, following some experience with the group. Due to its size, shape, bill size, and lack of eyering, it might be mistaken more often for a pewee than for another Empidonax. Compared to Western Wood-Pewee, however, it is browner- (less gray-) backed, lacks the sooty breast or "unbuttoned vest," has a mostly orange lower mandible (at least half-black in Western Wood-Pewee), and has a round, less peaked crown. Willow Flycatchers flick their tails



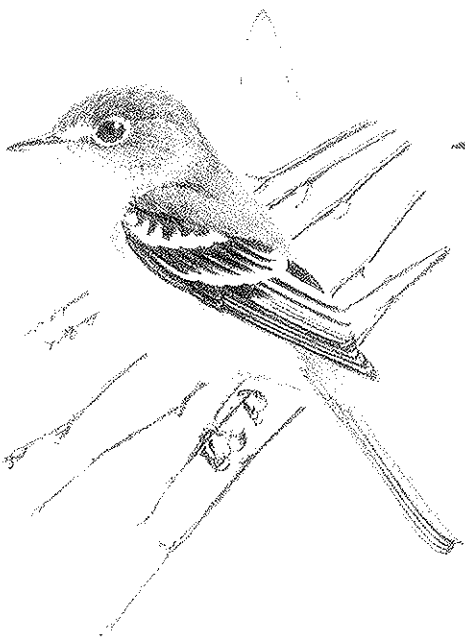
Primary projection: short (left) versus long (right).

and wings like other Empidonax; Wood-Pewees do not. Primary projection — how far the longest feathers of the folded wing reach down the tail — is longer for pewees. The call note of Willow Flycatcher is a "whit" or "pwhit," rather like several other Empidonax but louder and more emphatic. Western Wood-Pewee gives a wheezy descending, "peeceer." The brown tail of Willow Flycatcher is wide compared to most other Empidonax, especially at its junction with the body.

**GRAY FLYCATCHER** has the downward tail stroke that is absolutely diagnostic and identifies the species. It is also the longest-tailed of the group, and the narrow outer web of its outer tail feather is distinctly white. Dusky Flycatcher is the main look-alike, since both have rather small rounded heads, long narrow bills (in these two and Hammond's Flycatcher the bill is less than 5/8 as wide as it is long), are relatively pale in plumage (though Gray is usually more so), and both have long tails. Both also have rather quiet "whit" call notes that, to most ears, are indistinguishable. Go for the tail.

**DUSKY FLYCATCHER** is very similar to Gray in shape (small head, long tail), bill shape, and call note. In plumage, it more resembles Hammond's (a larger-headed, shorter-tailed bird): Dusky's bill is narrow like Hammond's' but longer. Its white eyering is narrow and round like Hammond's', but the lores are also pale, giving Dusky a more spectacled look. Dusky's outer tail feathers have whitish outer webs, closer to the white in Gray Flycatcher than the tan in Hammond's. Behavior during migration and on the winter range for Dusky is generally more complacent — only occasional tail lifts and very little wing-flicking. They sit still a lot. During breeding season, both species are very twitchy. While the call note of Dusky is a soft "whit" like Gray, Least, and Willow flycatchers', that of Hammond's is an abrupt "pic" or "pit."

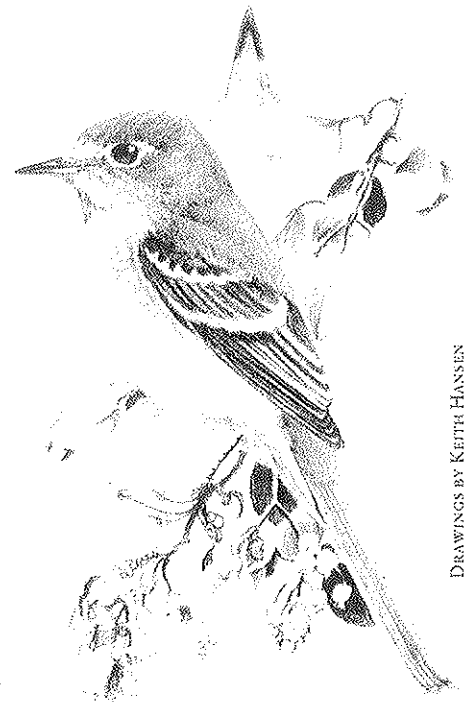
**HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER** is most similar to Dusky in plumage but closer to Least Flycatcher (very rare in California) in size, shape, and bill size. These two are very small birds with small-looking bills (Hammond's' bill looks tiny, and the whole bird is reminiscent of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet) and a large-headed, short-tailed look. Hammond's have more colorful green and yellow body plumage than Least. The inner secondaries and tertials of Least, unlike Hammond's, are very dark and broadly edged with white or yellow. (Alan Phillips has pointed to this last feature as generally more typical of eastern species of Empidonax than western ones.) Again, Hammond's' call is a sharp "pic" or "pit," very unlike the soft "Audubon's Warbler"-like "chit" or "whit" call from Least and several



Least Flycatcher on twig.



Gray Flycatcher on sagebrush.



Dusky Flycatcher on manzanita.

other Empidonax. Hammond's primary projection is clearly greater than that of Least and may be the best single field mark between the two.

#### Further Reading

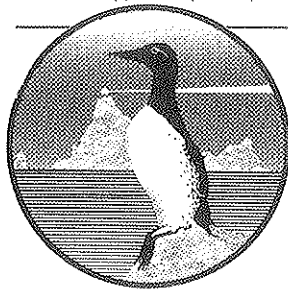
RECENTLY, SEVERAL SUPERB pieces on the Empidonax subject have appeared in print. Jon Dunn's *Field Notes* column in the Los Angeles Audubon Society's *Western Tanager* (April through August 1977) is excellent and fairly concise. An exhaustive treatment, complete with birds photographed in the hand, ran recently in several issues of Volume XIX of *Birding* magazine. It is authored by Kenn Kaufman and Brett Whitney and contains everything (and perhaps more) than most folks could learn about the subject. For in-hand definition (much of which is useful in the field), and a lot more, get *Identification Guide to North American Passerines* by Peter Pyle et al. Peter kindly read this article and made many alert suggestions.

OH, No! Now that we all know how to identify all five species of western Empidonax (ahem), can it get worse? You bet your Bushnells it can. Through use of electrophoresis to analyze variation in proteins, Dr. Ned Johnson with Jill A. Marten (*Auk* 105:177-191, 1988), has conclusively demonstrated that there are actually two species of "Western Flycatchers." Results of the work show that, where nesting is sympatric, the coastal form does not entirely blend with the interior form. In fact, as this Newsletter goes to press, the AOU has just split the two and named them Pacific Slope Flycatcher (*E. difficilis*) and Cordilleran Flycatcher (*E. occidentalis*). Although their songs are subtly, but noticeably, different, their call notes are more similar — and the birds *look* more alike — than any other species pair, even the Willow and Alder complex. We're still not sure how to identify silent out-of-range individuals, even in the hand. What we can be sure of is that a flurry of notes and articles about these "new birds" will soon be appearing in the periodical literature and, eventually, in the field guides.

SUMMARY. The best way to learn how to separate these little "Gnat Kings" is to let someone who is familiar with them lead you through their lairs in the field. Next best is to find one for yourself, look and listen carefully, and if, with all your information, it is still perplexing, take the advice of the masters and "... let most of them go just as Empidonaxes." Admire their strong delicacy and wish them well.

	WESTERN	WILLOW	GRAY	DUSKY	HAMMOND'S	LEAST
CALL NOTE	very high <i>it</i> <i>si</i> or <i>sit</i>	loud <i>whit</i> or <i>pwit</i>	quiet <i>whit</i>	quiet <i>whit</i>	sharp <i>pic</i> like Pygmy Nuthatch	quiet <i>chit</i> like "Audubon's" Warbler
BILL SIZE	large wide	large wide	long narrow	medium narrow	short narrow	short wide
OVERALL SHAPE	large head, short tail, big bird	large head, medium tail, big bird	small head, very long tail, big bird	small head, rather long tail, medium bird	large head, rather short tail, small bird	large head, rather short tail, small bird
EYERING	bold, buffy, almond- shaped	mostly absent, like peewees'	narrow, white, round, stands alone	narrow, white, round, light lores	narrow, white, round, stands alone	bold, white, slightly almond-shaped
TAIL MOVEMENTS	often and abrupt: up	occasional and abrupt: up	occasional and floppy: down	seldom and casual: up	often and abrupt: up	often and abrupt: up
WING MOVEMENTS	often: flits and shivers	occasional: flits and shivers	seldom and casual	seldom but snappy	frequent and snappy	seldom but snappy
VENTRAL BILL COLOR	90% orange, dark tip	90% orange, dark tip	80% pink or orange, dark tip	50-50% orange and indistinct black	50-50% orange and indistinct black	80% orange, black tip smudgy
PRIMARY EXTENSION	short	shortish	shortish	medium	long	short
CROWN CONTOUR	bushy- crowned	rather flat	round	round	rather round, slightly spiky at rear	rather round, slightly spiky at rear
THROAT COLOR	yellow	white	white	grayish	gray	white
BREAST	dark green wash over yellow	washed light olive- brown	slight grayish or pale green wash	light olive-gray wash; paler than Hammond's	olive-gray; often looks darker than Dusky; 'open-vested'	variable grayish over white
BACK COLOR	fresh green or worn brown	warm brown, occasional olive	pale gray or (juveniles) gray-olive	grayish olive to grayish	olive (fall), grayish (spring)	brownish olive to grayish
CROWN COLOR	green	brown	uniform pale gray	uniform medium gray	uniform darkish gray	uniform darkish gray-brown, dark feather centers
OUTER WEB OF OUTER TAIL FEATHER	tannish, light	tannish, light	white	grayish white	tannish, light	tannish, light

This chart should be used with caution: it refers only to birds away from nesting areas, where behavior and call notes are important, and to those in fresh plumage. Even so, plumage characteristics are variable within each species. Here the more helpful, non-feather features are given first.



## Farallon Patrol Log

A HEARTY THANKS to all these skippers, who have ferried PRBO personnel and supplies to Southeast Farallon Island during the spring. Our Farallon research program depends on the support and nautical expertise of the Farallon Patrol (Oceanic Society, San Francisco Bay Chapter).

January 2	HENRY CORNING	<i>Insight</i>
January 14	RON LEVINE	<i>Nausicaa</i>
January 28	JEFF MEYER	<i>Grun V</i>
February 13	JIM HECHT	<i>Shalom</i>
February 17	DAVE PLANT	<i>Rampage</i>
February 25	DICK HONEY	<i>Wind Dancer</i>
March 4	MARY BUCKMAN	<i>Shanting</i>
March 11	OSCAR FISHER	<i>Leaping Warrior</i>
March 26	DICK HONEY	<i>Wind Dancer</i>
April 7	TOM BATY	<i>Rampage</i>
April 8	TOM CHARKINS	<i>Kimbaya</i>