Empidonax Flycatchers: the bane of birdwatchers or simply a misunderstood group?

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From Peterson 1941
About this presentation

• Given at the Calgary Field Naturalists’ Bird Study Group in May 2013
• Had to remove pictures due to copyright concerns
• Plan on revising and updating the information, adding pictures and sounds as they become available
What is an *Empidonax* Flycatcher?

• All small songbirds with olive upper parts, pale throats and bellies, with whitish wing-bars and at times an eye-ring

• All extremely similar in plumage, therefore need other field marks to ID to species

• In Alberta, 7 species
The problem

• Extremely similar
• Many field marks
  – However few are 100%,
  – are hard to see or,
  – only applies to a bird in your hand
• Incorrect approach
  – Trying to identify non-singing bird on migration
• Correct approach
  – We will go over it
Keys to *Empidonax* identification

- While species look alike
- Can use other characteristics to narrow down field
- May lead to species ID
- These characteristics include:
  - Bill shape, mandible color
  - Habitat
  - Behavior
  - Shape of wingtip
  - Vocalizations (most important clue)
Least Flycatcher

- Small round-headed
- Bill short and wide
- Lower mandible: orange-yellow
- Throat /breast: white
- Short primary extension
- Short tail
- Conspicuous eye-ring
Least Flycatcher

- Deciduous or mixed forest
- Vocalizations
  - Song: *che-bek’*
  - Call note: ‘*whit’*
- Locations in Alberta
  - Anywhere there is forest
  - All natural regions

*che-bek’*
Dusky Flycatcher

- Medium sized bird
- Narrow bill
- Medium tail
- Short primaries
- Lower mandible pale
- Drab bird
- Eye-ring not well defined
Dusky Flycatcher

- Open deciduous habitat
  - Foothills

- Vocalizations
  - Song: Three syllables
  - Can vary order of syllables
  - Call note: “whit”

- Locations in Alberta
  - Foothills
  - In Kananaskis Country
    - Barrier Lake
    - Cypress Hills

“shli-ip”, “ri-i-nk” “r-eet”
Hammond’s Flycatcher

- Small bird
- Short tail
- Short bill
- Large head
- Compact
- Straight narrow bill
- ½ bill dark, then yellow
- Conspicuous eye-ring
Hammond’s Flycatcher

- Montane coniferous forests
- Vocalizations
  - Song three syllables
  - Typically same order of syllables
  - Call note “pip”
- Locations in Alberta
  - Banff (Muleshoe)
  - Rocky Mountain region
  - Local and uncommon

“se-put” “tsurrt”, “chu-lup”
Alder Flycatcher

- Chunky bird
- Wide bill
- Lower mandible pale
- Long primaries
- White throat
- Variable eye-ring
Alder Flycatcher

- Wet thickets
- Vocalizations
  - Song: ‘fee-bee-o’
  - Call notes: ‘pit’
- Locations in Alberta:
  - All regions except Grasslands
  - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
    - Bryant Creek
    - Common
Willow Flycatcher

- Robust bird
- Large, wide bill
- Large head
- Pale mandible
- Long primaries
- White throat
- No visible eye-ring
Willow Flycatcher

- Moist thickets
- Vocalizations
  - Song: 3 types
  - Call note: “whit”
- Locations in Alberta
  - Foothills
  - Limited distribution
  - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
    - Bryant Creek (nice to compare with Alders)
    - Sibbald Flats (only Willows)
  - Locally common
Willow vs. Alder flycatchers

- **Habitat**
  - Alders found in wetter habitat
  - Willows found in dryer habitat
  - HOWEVER situation is reversed in Alberta

- **Song**
  - Alder: 1 song type
  - Willow: 3 song types
Pacific-slope / Cordilleran Flycatcher

- Small bird
- Long tail for body
- Yellowish feathers
- Bill wide
- Lower mandible yellow-orange
- Tear-drop shaped eye-ring
Pacific-slope / Cordilleran Flycatcher

- Coniferous forests, near streams
- Hybridize
  - Which do we have in Alberta?
  - More work needed
- Vocalizations:
  - Song(s): very similar
  - Position note: distinctive
- Locations in Alberta
  - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
  - ~1 km W of Sibbald Meadows Pond
  - Bryant Creek (far south side)
  - Banff / Jasper

“seet  ps-SEET  ptsick”
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

- Large headed
- Short-tailed bird
- Broad bill
- Lower mandible: orange-yellow
- Conspicuous eye-ring
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

- Wetlands, muskegs
- Vocalizations
  - Song: 1 song type
  - Call note: ‘per-weee’
- Locations in Alberta
  - Boreal Forest / Foothills
  - Cypress Hills, Grande Cache, Fort McMurray
  - Bragg Creek Provincial Park

![Audio](che-bunk)
Summary

- *Empidonax* while challenging
  - Can be identified with practice
  - and of course a little patience
- Vocalizations are best clues
- Late May to early June
- Early in the morning,
  - enjoy the dawn chorus
- Good luck!
- Need additional information, feel free to email me

Alder Flycatcher chicks
Directions to Sibbald Creek Trail (Hwy 68)

• From Calgary:
  – Head West on Hwy 1 (toward Banff)
  – Take exit 143 for AB-68 S toward Sibbald Creek Trail
  – At the stop sign at the bottom of the exit turn left
  – Proceed ~ 14 km to Bryant Creek (right side of road)
  – See Map on next slide for further details
Sibbald Creek Trail (Hwy 68)