

Louisiana Bird Records Committee

Rare Bird Documentation

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Species: "Western" Flycatcher, *Empidonax difficilis/occidentalis*

Number of individuals: 1

Age and Sex: Unknown

Date: 26 December, 2019

Location: Primeaux X Wild Turkey Roads, SE Crawley, Acadia Parish; 30.057°N, 92.411°W

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S62683584>

Other Observers: None

Original Observer: Van Remsen

Circumstances. I was birding with friends in the area, when Van, who was participating in the Crowley CBC, texted me saying he had an *Empidonax* that was not a Least Flycatcher. My friends had to depart in the early afternoon, so I swung by the location Van had the flycatcher, to see if I could find it. I arrived at 2:30, and after a couple of minutes tried some mob tape, to see if the flycatcher would come in with other birds. After ~15 minutes with no sign of it, I walked down the road a bit, birding around. When I returned to my car, I tried some *Empidonax* vocalizations of various species. When I tried Pacific-slope Flycatcher, the bird immediately jumped up out of the Privet thickets, and became agitated, though it did not call. After a few moments it disappeared back into the understory. I tried Cordilleran, then Least Flycatcher calls, and got no response. I then tried Pacific-sloped Flycatcher once again, and the bird quickly returned. It did this several more times, and I had great looks at it down to <5 meters, and was able to take some digibinned photos, holding my iPhone up to my binoculars.

Description. Relatively small, greenish flycatcher, with behavior typical of most *Empidonax* flycatchers (staying low, flycatching but not sallying, flicking tail, etc.). It was olive-green above, more yellow-y below, with no gray or white tones; the throat was pale yellow. The primary projection was moderate. The wing bars were pale yellowish, not contrasting much against the olive-brown wings (much less than a Least's white wingbars contrast against their blackish wings). The crown was peaked with a slight shaggy crest. The eye ring was distinctly tear drop shaped, and off yellow (not white). The maxilla was entirely dark, while the mandible was entirely pale orange, with no dark towards the tip. The bird vocalized twice (no recording), but was the generic "tink!" call that is not helpful in distinguishing Pacific-slope from Cordilleran.

Photos and details recorded at the time of my sighting are in my eBird checklist, linked at the top of the document.

Discussion. *Empidonax* flycatchers are notoriously difficult to identify, with Pacific-slope/Cordilleran widely considered to be the most difficult identification in North America. Most birders rightly consider silent individuals to be indistinguishable. I did not hear this bird give any diagnostic calls, so I do not feel comfortable pinning a definite identification on it, though the vigorous response to Pacific-slope calls, while ignoring Cordilleran, leads me to believe the bird was likely a Pacific-slope Flycatcher.

I separated it from other species of *Empidonax* first by probability: the only likely species in winter are “Western”, Least, Gray, Hammond’s, or Dusky (though there are no state records of Dusky), as there are few if any valid winter records of Yellow-bellied, Alder, Willow, or Acadian Flycatchers for the United States. Next, the entirely olive and yellow plumage, with no gray or white hints, further ruled out all likely contenders other than “Western”. The entirely orange mandible was a further strike against both Hammond’s and Dusky Flycatchers, as they almost always show a dusky tip to the bill. Additionally, the teardrop-shaped, yellowish eye-ring distinguished this bird from the other likely contenders, as they all show more rounded and whiter eye-rings. The final line of evidence I used was response to playback. I tried recordings of all likely contenders (aside from Gray and Dusky), and got no appreciable response, aside from recordings of Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Thus, despite the pitfalls and problems with identification of *Empidonax*, I feel comfortable calling this individual a “Western” Flycatcher, probably a Pacific-slope.

I have experience with all of the species of *Empidonax* found in North America, and have the most experience with Pacific-slope, as it was a common species throughout California when I lived there (prior to mid 2012). My most recent experience with Pacific-slope Flycatcher was in June, 2019, when I several during the tail end of spring migration in the desert of California.

Photos of the “Western” Flycatcher, taken in the field on 26 December, 2019.



Figure 1. Not an exceptionally crisp photo, but the yellowy throat and under parts, tear-drop shaped eye-ring, and orange mandible are visible.



Figure 2. The shaggy crest is obvious.



Figure 3. Another less-than-stellar photo, this shows the overall olive tones to the head, back, and tail, tear-drop shaped eye-ring, and orange mandible, as well as giving an impression of the primary projection.



Figure 4. Slightly clearer than figure 3, this image shows the shaggy crest and coloration of the wing bar and tertial edges relative to the background color of the wing.