

# Southwestern Willow Flycatcher

(*Empidonax traillii extimus*)—Endangered

## Description

Willow flycatchers are small (6" tall) birds with greyish-green backs and wings, whitish throats, light grey-green breasts and pale yellowish bellies. They have two white bars on each wing and usually lack the white eye ring of similar small green flycatchers. At extremely close distances, willow flycatchers reveal a bill which is black on the top (upper mandible) and completely yellow on the bottom (lower mandible). Willow flycatchers are so similar in appearance to other flycatchers of the *Empidonax* genus, that the best way to distinguish them is by their song—a sneezy “fitz-bew” or “fitz-a-bew.”

## Distribution and Habitat

Two subspecies of willow flycatchers breed in Utah and a third may occur during spring and fall migration. These subspecies cannot be distinguished in the field and may interbreed in portions of the state. However, southwestern willow flycatchers are generally considered to breed

in southern Utah in the Mojave, Utah Mountains, and Colorado Plateau ecoregions. The other subspecies (*E. t. adastus*) breeds in western and northern Utah. The current distribution of the southwestern subspecies is not well known in Utah. Recent surveys have confirmed only two nesting sites (one on the Virgin River, the other near Fish Lake), though suitable habitat has been located along several streams and rivers including the Virgin River and its tributaries, Kanab Creek, Paria River, and the Colorado River system including the San Juan, Escalante and Green Rivers. Locations with historic records for this subspecies include Virgin and Santa Clara Rivers, Beaver Dam Wash, Kanab Creek, San Juan River and southern portions of the Colorado River. Additional records from the Moab area and the Green River indicate that the subspecies may extend into the Book Cliffs of northeastern Utah.

The willow flycatcher nests exclusively in streamside shrubs and trees (i.e., riparian habitat), nesting sites are usually characterized by a combination of willows, cottonwoods, and box elders. In some locations where nonnative plants have invaded, these flycatchers may nest in tamarisk and Russian olive dominated habitats. Breeding habitats usually consist of thick, relatively wide stands of riparian vegetation over 10 feet tall. Standing water is often present below or near the nest site. The flycatchers forage extensively in riparian habitats and occasionally feed over open water or in adjacent upland habitats. Their diet consists of a wide variety of flying insects and insect larvae such as caterpillars and beetle grubs.

The wintering grounds of willow flycatchers are not well known,

but they probably winter in western Mexico and western Central America. Winter habitat characteristics are not known.

## Life History

Willow flycatchers are relatively late nesters in Utah. They arrive on the breeding grounds in late May and usually start nesting in early June. The female builds a small, compact cup nest made of dried weeds, leaves, grasses, bark, and lined with feathers, hair, and plant down. After laying 3-4 eggs, the female incubates for 12-13 days. Eggs hatch in mid to late June and both parents tend the nestlings; nestlings fledge in 12-14 days (late June to early July). Young and adults may stay in the nesting area until August or early September before starting their southerly migration. Willow flycatchers winter in the subtropics, most likely in western Mexico and the Central American isthmus. During their fall and spring migrations, willow flycatchers often travel at night in flocks mixed with flycatchers and other songbirds.

## Threats and Reasons for Decline

Southwestern willow flycatcher populations have declined over the last 50 years and there are currently only around 500 breeding pairs remaining. The primary reason for decline is the loss and alteration of riparian habitat in the southwestern U.S. Additional factors in the decline include parasitism by cowbirds. Cowbirds have expanded their range into all of the western states and are experiencing a rapid population increase. Cowbirds remove eggs from flycatcher nests (and nests of many other birds), replacing them with their own eggs, leaving the



Photo courtesy of Renee Netter.

host flycatcher to raise cowbird young. Cowbird nestlings grow more rapidly than flycatchers and out compete the flycatcher nestlings for food brought to the nest by the flycatcher adults. Nests that are parasitized by cowbirds rarely produce any flycatcher fledglings.

Loss of riparian habitat continues to be a major threat to willow flycatchers (and a large diversity of riparian-nesting birds). Riparian habitat is altered or destroyed by urban development, flooding of reservoirs, road construction, overgrazing, conversion to agriculture, invasion of nonnative plants, and some recreational activities. Cowbird parasitism is also a threat in some areas where large numbers of cowbirds congregate near riparian areas.

## Recovery Efforts

A recovery plan has not yet been written for the southwestern willow flycatcher. However, a team of Utah biologists has been formed to write a management plan which can be used until a recovery plan is in place. In addition, surveys have been conducted in several parts of the state to locate willow flycatchers and suitable nesting habitat. Once nest sites are located they can receive protection from harmful activities. Both genetic and vocalization research is being conducted to determine the distribution of Willow Flycatcher subspecies in Utah. Because of the importance of riparian habitat to a wide variety of wildlife species, riparian conservation and restoration programs have been initiated in several parts of the state. These efforts will help to preserve and enhance nesting habitat for willow flycatchers.

## How You Can Help

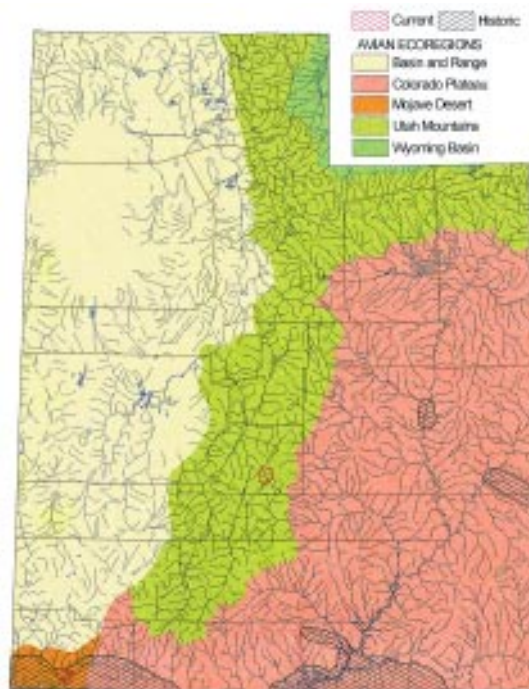
Several groups are engaged in riparian restoration and conservation as well as clean-ups. You can take part by contributing time or money to these efforts. These

groups are often looking for volunteers to help plant riparian trees and shrubs. You can contact your local Utah Division of Wildlife Resources office and ask if they know of any projects in your area.

Willow flycatchers are extremely difficult to identify and can only reliably be distinguished by voice. But, if you are certain you've heard a willow flycatcher **in riparian habitat in June or July**, contact your local Utah Division of Wildlife Resources office to report it.

## Where To Learn More

There are a few published books or articles dealing specifically with flycatchers. Check bookstores and libraries for general books and audio tapes on birds and songbirds (see reference provided). Also look for books on riparian birds and riparian restoration or management. Other educational materials such as video tapes and CDROMs are available through specialty (nature) bookstores and (wild) bird shops. Web sites can be found by searching for the keywords "Willow Flycatchers," "Empidonax flycatchers," "flycatchers," and "riparian birds."



Probable historical Southwestern Willow Flycatcher distribution.

## For More Information

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*Southwestern Willow Flycatcher nest photo courtesy of Renee Netter.*

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*Southwestern Willow Flycatcher habitat photo courtesy of Renee Netter.*