

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture May 12th, 2010.

Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

You can find **Western Tanagers** in flocks during migration. There have been occasional reports of large numbers of migrants very locally on certain ridges these last few weeks. Also a lot of reports of people seeing almost no migrants. It seems that migration is much more localized this year, not widespread.

Some of the birds looked for during the class field trip to Briones did not show up. The wet winter may be a reason. Birds of arid valleys and deserts are not forced to go away from the dry interior, they may have enough water there to be able to nest locally instead of being pushed far. When there are invasions of species like Black-throated Sparrows there was usually a wet year followed by a draught. They have excellent breeding success during the wet year and then there are too many birds during the draught, they get pushed into areas where they would not normally be.

Bird **nest boxes** come in different sizes and with different hole sizes that have been specified for particular birds. Also the height at which you put up the box can affect which species you get. Starlings do not like to nest in bird houses that are below six or seven feet from the ground. Bluebirds are well studied nest box users because of the big decline in bluebirds due to starlings occupying old woodpecker holes. Bluebird trails are bluebird boxes set up in appropriate habitat with some distance between them. To prevent Tree Swallows from nesting in all the bluebird houses some places have put up boxes back to back. If Tree Swallows nest in one box they will not nest in the other box, leaving that one available to bluebirds.

Some birds are adapted to very specific types of bird houses, such as the Purple Martin. They use an apartment house type bird house on poles away from any trees. The ones in CA don't use nest boxes, the eastern Purple Martins are the ones that use these houses. The ones in CA have become very scarce, they have become impacted severely by introduced starlings. They rarely use man made structures.

House Sparrows will frequently use nest boxes that were put out for wrens, it is pretty tricky to discourage House Sparrows.

The **Kern River Preserve** is an extensive set of cottonwood and other riparian vegetation in a flood plain just east of Lake Isabella, northeast of Bakersfield. One of the very few bits of extensive riparian habitat left anywhere in CA. Brown-crested Flycatchers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Summer Tanagers breed there. Vermilion Flycatcher has attempted to nest.

They have a number of bird festivals at the preserve.

It is hard to find motels in the area near the preserve.

These special breeders are all species that like riparian habitat and are found mostly in Arizona and very scarce in southern CA. There is a strong tendency along water courses in CA, particularly water courses in the deserts, to cut down cottonwood trees because they soak up enormous amounts of water. The Colorado River used to have extensive riparian habitat and all of these species used to breed along the Colorado River. Basically all of those trees have been cut down within the last half century and replaced by trailer parks.

There is an extensive riparian site where the Bill Williams River comes into the Colorado River on the Arizona side. There is nothing like that on the CA side. All of these species are found within the Bill Williams delta region.

There is a canyon that runs into Lake Isabella from the north, Black Swifts can sometimes be seen in the evening in Kernville.

East from the preserve some dirt roads go up into more arid mountains, you can get to Butterbredt Spring that way. Scott's Orioles are in the Yuccas and LaConte's Thrashers in the arroyos in those mountains. Mountain Quail come to the spring at Butterbredt Spring. In spring and fall the place is a trap for rare vagrants.

Kern County probably has more species than any other county in CA that is non-coastal. It reaches up into the mountains. It has a lot of desert and a lot of oases. Eastern Kern County has been the subject of a fair amount of research. A manuscript on the birds of eastern Kern County by Matt Heindel is on Joe's website: <http://fog.ccsf.org/%7Ejmorlan/eastkern.pdf>

***Myiarcus* flycatchers**

There are many more species in Middle and South America.

Obligate cavity nesting birds, which is pretty unique among flycatchers. They use old woodpecker holes. They will also use nest boxes. Can use nest boxes for bluebirds and Tree Swallows. The nest of most species has the shed skin of a snake incorporated into it. The function of that is not clear.

The breeding *Myiarchus* in most of CA is the Ash-throated Flycatcher and in some places in southeastern CA the Brown-crested Flycatcher.

COMMON FIELD MARKS

They all look very similar.

Various amounts of yellow on the belly.

Throat and breast usually whitish or grayish.

Usually a bushy crest.

Bill rounded in shape, not flat or triangular like in *Empidonax*. Usually all dark, sometimes with a little pale at the base.

Tail

Some red in the tail, subtle differences in the tail pattern can be used if you have excellent views of the underside of the tail, sometimes the upperside can be useful also. Good vies of the exact amount of red and where that red is can be difficult to come by in the field. R1 (central tail feathers) all dark in all species. Folded tail from above looks all dark, the red is only visible on the underside. R2-R5 vary, the outer R6, the feathers that you can see best, are the ones you should be looking at. Exception: Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

Wing panel

Most species also have red fringes to the primary feathers and some of them have red fringes on the secondaries as well. This shows up as a reddish patch in the wings when the birds are flying and a little bit of a red panel on the folded wing.

Juveniles

The tail as well as the primaries and secondaries tend to have a lot more red on them than in adults. The tail and wing feathers are usually molted on the breeding grounds. You usually see these red-tailed red-winged birds in August.

Brown-crested Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Ranges all the way down through South America. There are many subspecies. Two of them reach NA.

In Texas and eastern Mexico the subspecies *cooperi* which is smaller with relatively smaller bills. Sibley retracted that its bill is larger than on Great Crested Flycatcher.

In Arizona and western Mexico, also reaching southeastern CA, the bigger subspecies *magister* with substantially larger bills.

The western population breeds locally along the Colorado River and in tall trees mostly in riparian habitat elsewhere in southern CA, including the Kern River Preserve.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve near Palm Springs is another spot where it occurs.

Tends to be a treetop bird. (Ash-throated usually forage lower.) They tend not to sit on exposed perches. You find this bird by hearing it.

Joe went to the Anza Borrego desert in June last year. There was a trailer park in the town of Borrego Springs. Near the entrance a pair of Brown-crested Flycatchers was nesting in a palm tree. The birds were way up in the tops of the trees and you could hear their call.

Only one record in northern CA, a bird trapped on the Farallon Islands and examined in the hand. There have been a few claims but they have not been well enough documented to be accepted. It is an extraordinary rare bird in northern CA. Rarer in northern CA than the two review list species Great Crested Flycatcher and Dusky-capped Flycatcher, needs documentation even though it not is a review list species since it breeds in southern CA.

Hardly any records in coastal CA. Very rarely show up in the wintertime along the coast of southern CA.

FIELD MARKS

Bigger and bulkier than an Ash-throated Flycatcher.

Both are pale yellow on the belly. On worn birds in the summer you can hardly see the yellow, it becomes so pale. In fresh plumage in fall and winter they are brighter yellow. In general a little more red in the tail than Ash-throated.

Bill very big, bigger than the other *Myiarchus*, and all dark.

Red along the edges of the primaries. The edges of the secondaries are whitish.

The tertials are also gray and narrowly fringed with whitish.

The red on R6 (the outer tail feathers) is on the inner edge of the inner web all the way down to the tip, the red does not reach the feather shaft. So the inner web is red on the inside and a little bit of dark on the outside along the shaft all the way to the tip. This is not normally visible in the field.

The face is gray.

The eye looks relatively small.

A somewhat bushy crest but not a peaked crest, but it may be raised up when the bird is excited.

VOCALIZATION

A rising weep-call.

Other vocalizations include quite an elaborate song given usually very early in the morning.

Great Crested Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

The only *Myiarchus* that breeds regularly throughout the eastern US. Fairly common and widespread in deciduous hardwood forests. Usually forages high. A longer distance migrant than Brown-crested, wintering in South America. Rare vagrant to CA in the fall along the coast and some in interior southern CA. Almost all records in September and October. Mostly one day wonders. Review list species.

FIELD MARKS

A rather big billed, dark headed bird with a fairly bushy crest. Base of the bill pale but that is going to vary. The base of the bill can be pale in young birds of any *Myiarchus*, in the Great Crested Flycatcher it persists to adulthood. Pink mouth lining. Mouth lining color is a character that does separate some of the very similar species, particularly in the tropics. A more colorful bird. Brighter yellow on the underparts. Throat and chest much darker, a mouse gray color, not pale whitish gray or ash gray like Brown-crested or Ash-throated. Stronger contrast between the yellow on the belly and the dark gray on the chest compared to any of the other *Myiarchus*. Back greenish or greenish olive. Ash-throated more gray. The innermost tertial is broadly white fringed, the white frequently coming to the shaft. Important field mark. this looks like a white wedge or white triangle on the folded wing from the back. No other *Myiarchus* in NA has that much white on the tertials. Primaries a little bit of rust on the outer web, (white shafts). White edges to secondaries. The rusty on the inner webs of the tail feathers extends all the way to the shaft and down all the way to the tip of the tail. Molt before they migrate, the ones we get as vagrants are generally in fresh plumage.

VOCALIZATION

Also a rising wheep call but with a different tonal quality than the Brown-crested Flycatcher. it also has a variety of other calls.

Nutting's Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Middle America, non-migratory. One winter record from Orange County and two records from Arizona.

FIELD MARKS

Looks very much like Ash-throated. The tail feathers have rusty going all the way to the tip. Bright orange mouth linings.

VOCALIZATION

Call a sharp rising peek. A sharper, more of a rising note, rather than the soft, more liquid quipp note that the Santa Cruz bird gave.

Ash-throated Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in CA.

Any *Myiarchus* seen in CA in the summer months should be assumed to be an Ash-throated unless you have a compelling reason to believe it is something else.

If you see a bird in August with a lot of red in the tail and wings it is probably a juvenal Ash-throated.

Found in a variety of habitats. Sibley talks about desert scrub which is one place where it does occur. In northern CA it is more of an oak-woodland and riparian habitat bird. It prefers the interior, the foothills and Central Valley rather than along the immediate coast where it is relatively scarce, occurring mostly as an uncommon migrant.

Usually forages at eye level or within ten to twelve feet from the ground.

Arrives here in April and breeds through May and June. They are fairly faded then because they don't have a spring molt. After nesting and the fall molt they tend to be much brighter looking and attract attention and people try to turn them into other species.

Are very, very rare in CA in the winter. If you find a *Myiarchus* flycatcher in midwinter look very, very carefully. There are other species it is more likely to be than Ash-throated Flycatcher, most notably Dusky-capped Flycatcher. But see the account below of a bird in Santa Cruz.

FIELD MARKS

Smaller than Brown-crested or Great Crested.

Bill smaller than most of the other *Myiarchus*, all black. Sometimes may show a little pale at the base of the mandible.

Proportionately larger eye than Brown-crested or Great Crested.

Typically the dark on the outer web of the tail feathers will cut across and the entire tip of the feather is dark, the rusty does not reach the tip. Diagnostic for Ash-throated if you can see it. If it is not present it does not mean that it is not an Ash-throated. The tip of the tail can be worn off. This happens partly because they are cavity nesting birds. They abrade the tail in the nest hole. They also use the tail to prop themselves up against the trunk at the entrance of the nest hole.

Fairly drab looking. But after they molt in the fall both the adults and the juveniles can look really snappy.

Throat and chest ashy (pale gray, almost whitish), blends with the pale yellow belly, does not contrast. More like a Brown-crested than like a Great Crested.

Rust on the primaries only, secondaries edged with white, tertials narrowly fringed with white.

Bushy crest but perhaps not as extensive as Brown-crested or Great Crested.

Wing bars vary. Can be quite prominent in fresh plumage.

In juvenal plumage which is briefly held, probably about 6 weeks, the birds have the whole tail red, including R1. You see a red tail from above. This is true of any *Myiarchus*.

VOCALIZATION

Frequently gives a staccato whistle call that sounds like a life guard whistle.

A WINTER BIRD IN SANTA CRUZ ORIGINALLY IDENTIFIED AS NUTTING'S

A bird in Santa Cruz in the winter was identified as Nutting's. It turned out to be an Ash-throated. It was identified as Nutting's because Ash-throated is not expected in the wintertime and Nutting's had occurred in southern CA in the wintertime. The bird gave a call note that was unfamiliar, qwip, qwip, qwip. Not the life guard whistle that we are mostly used to or the kebrrrrek call that's given mostly as part of the song. Qwip is a vocalization that is given by Ash-throated in the winter and that we normally don't hear in CA.

Some people still think it was a Nutting's like Don Robertson.

It did not seem to have the typical tail pattern of Ash-throated.

There is a link to more information about this bird on Joe's class website.

La Sagra's Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Cuba and Bahamas.

It is a remnant of what used to be a larger, more widespread species of the Caribbean islands. It used to be called the Stolid Flycatcher. It is now split into four species, one of which retains the name Stolid Flycatcher.

The reason for the split were differences in the vocalizations. Flycatcher vocalizations are believed to be inherited and not learned. It is generally believed that vocalizations are the prime mechanism for reproductive isolation in these flycatchers. Since they look alike they need to be able to use vocalizations to identify an appropriate mate. Any kind of difference in vocalizations is likely to result in some kind of split.

There have been numerous records in Florida.

The Bahamas are quite close to Florida. If the wind blows the wrong way some of these Bahaman specialties end up on the east coast of Florida.

Ash-throated is a vagrant to Florida, if you have an unusual *Myiarchus* there you got to be really careful. Great Crested is expected, but you might have Brown Crested, Ash-throated or La Sagra's.

FIELD MARKS

Resembles a really washed-out Ash-throated.

VOCALIZATION

High-pitched "wink", often doubled.

Dusky-capped Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

One of the most common *Myiarchus* in pine-oak woodlands in the Mexican mountains.

Ranges all the way down into south America where it is the dominant *Myiarchus* in most areas, either in the mountains or in much of the lowlands in the tropics.

There are numerous different subspecies. the one that ranges typically as a breeding bird into the mountains of Arizona is sometimes called the **Olivaceous Flycatcher**. It had this name in the old field guides before it was lumped with the other Dusky-capped Flycatchers of Middle and South America.

A very rare visitor to CA, mostly along the immediate coast and mostly in the very late fall and winter. It is more likely to be seen in CA in the winter than Ash-throated. Has occurred in SF.

Likes willow thickets but sometimes shows up in oak trees in a park like setting.

Review list species.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest of the regularly occurring *Myiarchus*.

A small brown bird with brighter yellow underparts than Ash-throated.

More extensively yellow.

Bill quite small but long. Thinner and longer than other *Myiarchus*.

Rusty fringes on the primaries and unlike the other *Myiarchus* also on the secondaries.

The only white on the wing panel are the tertial fringes.

The birds that we see in CA in the winter invariably have rusty fringes to the base of the outer webs of the tail feathers. The inner webs are entirely dark, the rust is on the other side of the feather shaft. It shows up as rusty edges on the top of the tail, not visible from the underside, exactly the opposite of every other *Myiarchus*. On the underside no rust whatsoever on the inner webs.

VOCALIZATION

A sad whistle, similar to Say's Phoebe.