

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 21st, 2010.

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

It is still early for **Western Wood-Pewee**. They have just barely started to arrive. Probably won't be here in numbers for another week or two. Western Wood-Pewee will be peaking in May.

Olive-sided Flycatcher arrives a little earlier.

Willow Flycatcher, which has no eye ring and sometimes is confused with wood-pewees, is even less likely in April.

There was a **Great-tailed Grackle** at the waterfront in SF this winter.

The first ones found in SF were at Aquatic Park 15-20 years ago. It was a pair that attempted to nest for several consecutive years. Their eggs never hatched.

Great-tailed Grackles have been breeding regularly in Monterey County near the town of Seaside on islands in a lake the last few years. Historically the species did not occur in CA at all. It arrived along the Colorado River probably in the 1950s. Agriculture and irrigation provided a corridor for these birds to move into southern CA. It took quite a while for them to get to Furnace Creek where they are now very common. It took them a little bit longer to get to coastal southern CA where they are now fairly common but still local. Especially around reed beds in parks where there are things like cattails.

Somebody did a study on those in the Imperial Valley quite a while ago because there were two different races. One coming from Texas and the other from Baja. The ones from Baja are smaller than the ones from Texas. Apparently the birds in southern CA are a mixture of those two subspecies.

Do show up as vagrants as far as the Oregon border. There are records from Oregon, too.

The **White-throated Sparrow** that has been coming to Angie's back yard in Cole Valley since Christmas is singing now.

All of Joe's **White-crowned Sparrows** in Pacifica have left in the last week. They were of the migratory *pugetensis* subspecies.

Angie's **Golden-crowned Sparrows** are still there, Joe's left about three weeks ago.

Downy Woodpeckers breed in the yuccas in the succulent garden in the Arboretum. Sally saw them mating there. Their old holes get used by Tree Swallows and sometimes Pygmy Nuthatches.

Least Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Very widespread bird of the north and the east. Probably the most common *Empidonax* in NA.

Tends to occur in more open areas than most of the other *Empidonax*. Habitat like parks, gardens, farmlands, orchards is where you find them in the east. It certainly has benefited greatly from the changes brought by civilization. It will come into disturbed or planted areas.

Tends to stay low, especially in the winter when it perches mostly in the weed stocks at or below eye level unlike other *Empidonax* that like to hang around the tree tops.

Winters fairly commonly in Mexico as far north as southern Sonoma and southern Tamaulipas.

Joe found them there in the winter in weedy fields around the edges of the forest.

Occurs directly to the north of CA. Isolated populations in Washington and Oregon. Also has been reported nesting in the Warner Mountains in extreme northern CA. Rare but regular migrant in CA. Very few winter records. Most records of migrating birds in the fall. Many of them young birds which may have rather buffy wing bars. The birds usually found at Pt Reyes or in SF are young, can be fairly brightly patterned. The adult birds migrate first and then molt. They like the coastal bush lupines out at Pt Reyes. You are looking down at them as they are working the tops of these shrubs. That is the sort of habitat where Joe has seen them in Mexico also. They get higher up into the trees in the east where they nest but in general a reasonably low foraging bird.

HISTORY IN CALIFORNIA

Back in the mid 70s it was not recorded in CA until some specimens were collected. Somebody found a specimen at the museum of vertebrate zoology collected in Santa Cruz in June in 1896. It had been labeled Traill's Flycatcher. Starting in the mid 70s certain observant individuals started looking at *Empidonax* and started to identify Least Flycatchers in the field. The bird was reviewed by the California Bird Records Committee. They were even more conservative then. It was quite a leap to start putting sight records of Least Flycatcher on the rare bird alert. You still need to be an advanced birder to identify a Least Flycatcher in CA. Beginning and intermediate birders don't have enough field experience with other *Empidonax* to be able to eliminate all of the other species. You also need to let some birds go. Now there are so many records that it is not even reviewed by the committee any more.

FIELD MARKS

Overall a rather plump little bird sitting rather straight upright. Usually fairly large-headed. Primary projection very short. Important field mark! Wing tips come to just around the base of the tail. Plenty of room for the tail to move without disturbing the wing tips. Eye ring tends to be complete, sometimes with a little bit of a tail behind the eye but usually circular. Sometimes a slight break at the top. Bill relatively short and typically fairly wide. Wider and shorter than other *Empidonax*. Lower mandible usually quite pale with some dark at the tip often blending with the pale coloration on the rest of the mandible. But that feature is variable. Some seem to have almost the entire mandible yellow. Compare to the rather similar Hammonds which on average has a narrower and darker bill. The bill of the Dusky Flycatcher is somewhat longer than that of a Least but otherwise rather similar. Tail quite narrow and relatively short. Tail length depends on viewing angle, Joe has been confused by Least Flycatchers that showed longer tails than he expected. Tail not supposed to have white edges, but the outer webs are paler and translucent which is why it is not reliable to get too involved in whether or not the bird has white in its tail.

Adult birds in the fall are in worn plumage, they molt after migration.

Young birds brightly patterned:

Wing panels with bold contrasting tertial fringes and very bold wing bars.

In general quite pale underneath, especially on the throat where they appear to be white.

Much paler on the underparts than any other *Empidonax* except maybe Gray.

Some of the younger birds will show a little tinge of yellow on the lower belly. Adult birds especially in the spring almost completely whitish on the underparts with just a little tinge of gray.

Upperpart color especially in fresh plumage birds brownish or olive.

Tends to perch in a fairly upright manner.

Actively flicks its tail. Flicks it upwards the way most of them do in a very quick way.

Wings don't move when it flicks its tail, that is a difference between Least and the similar Hammond's in which you get simultaneous tail and wing flicking.

Least may quiver its tail rapidly up and down slightly when it lands. Other *Empidonax* don't usually do that.

VOCALIZATIONS

Song a very dry double note that sounds like tschebek, tschebek.

Call note a single whit-note, very fast and dry and snappy compared to the liquid whit-note that is given by the Willow Flycatcher.

It snaps the t at the end, sounds almost like an Audubon's Warbler far away.

Also emphatic but not as snappy whit-notes are given by the Dusky and the Gray Flycatcher.

Hammond's Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

A very common breeding bird in fir forests, Red Fir and other types of fir, in the Sierra Nevada and north up into Canada and Alaska. Nest usually out on a horizontal branch in a conifer.

Much more common as a breeding bird in western Canada than in CA. Probably together with Willow the second most common migrant *Empidonax* in CA, both right behind the Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Hammond's is more common in early Spring; Willow migrates later in the Spring. You can find quite a few Hammond's Flycatchers in April and early May. In the Fall, Willow is an early migrant; Hammond's later.

In desert areas like Death Valley, Morongo Valley or any of the desert oases Hammond's can be quite common. One of the better places to study them.

In the Bay Area the spring migration is almost entirely through the interior. On Mt Diablo in early May it is not that unusual to find them, sometimes in substantial numbers. When there is a cloudy day with a cold front that has come through and that has grounded migratory birds you can see quite a few. There have been reports of up to 40 Hammond's on a good day in Mitchell Canyon, which is on the east side of Mt Diablo. Along the immediate coast it is less likely to be found, it is in the interior foothill ranges where they seem to be migrating through.

A very rare winter vagrant to the Bay Area. Occasionally on CBCs.

OCCURRENCE OF HAMMOND'S AND DUSKY IN THE SIERRA NEVADA

In order to get experience with Hammond's a lot of people like to spend summers in the Sierra.

Two species of *Empidonax* breed in the Sierra Nevada, the Hammond's and the Dusky.

Both have relatively pale throats. They look quite a bit alike. Their songs are almost identical.

The call notes are much more different than the songs. Unless you have lots of field experience with these birds identifying them by song is less reliable than identifying them by their call notes.

There is a lot of misinformation in the birder grapevine about Hammond's vs. Dusky in the Sierra Nevada. For example in a place like Bridal Veil Campground near Bridal Veil Creek on the road

up to Glacier Point there are a lot of *Empidonax*. They are almost all foraging high in the trees or singing from near the tree tops. These were traditionally identified by a lot of birders as Hammond's Flycatchers because they had the idea that Hammond's forage up high and Dusky forage low in Manzanita and in open areas with shrubbery. This is not true. Those singing birds are all Dusky. They will sing from high up in the trees as well as forage high up in the trees. The Hammond's, although foraging high in the trees, do not like open areas, do not like disturbed areas at all and tend to be found in the middle of the Red Firs. The best place to study both of them is Crane Flat. There is a gas station there and a store, it got some meadows and occasionally has Great Gray Owls. On the edges of those meadows there is dense Red Fir forest. There are Hammond's Flycatchers in there. On the Crane Flat fire road there is Manzanita, the birds there are all Dusky.

Joe's experience is that through most of the Sierra Nevada, there are a lot more Dusky in a lot more different habitats. The forest is not dense, which happens with old growth forest in general. Trees have fallen down, there are open areas, tall scattered trees are here and there. Dusky are perfectly at home in those places.

Dusky is easy to find in Yosemite. Finding a Hammond's isn't necessarily all that easy.

Hammond's outnumber Dusky in migration, maybe 10:1 or 50:1. It is really unclear because of identification issues.

Hammond's much more common as a migrant, Dusky much more common as a breeding bird as a general rule.

FIELD MARKS

Shape a lot like a Least Flycatcher, relatively large-headed and short-tailed.

Peaked crown.

Much longer primary projection than Least or Dusky or Gray.

When it flips its tail up it tends to flip its wings at the same time.

Tail relatively short, usually notched.

Very small, narrow bill one of the better field marks.

Mandible usually mostly but not completely dark, makes the bill hard to see when they forage high overhead in the trees.

All other empids have a broader mandible which is mostly pale.

The birds look pretty much the same in spring and fall.

Dingier on the underparts than Least, but otherwise most similar to Least.

Olive or brownish color on the back sometimes with a greenish tinge contrasting with a gray nape. This is a pattern associated more with Hammond's than with others. But looking at the books it seems Dusky can show a pattern like that and even Gray.

Adults in the springtime look much grayer.

Eye ring similar to Least but more likely to have a little bit of a tail behind the eye. Gives it a surprised look.

Frequently forages high in the trees. It has a kinglet-like aspect except for the large head.

Both in migration and on the breeding grounds these are active birds that fly out and come back, pump their tails and flip their wings. Then they settle down, they sit still and don't move at all. A combination of a lot of exercise, calisthenics, followed by long periods of rest.

If you see an *Empidonax* in the springtime and it does not have a yellow throat (which would probably make it a Pacific-slope Flycatcher) you should consider Hammond's. Look for the small bill, the lack of obvious yellow on the underparts particularly on the throat. Listen for a peek-call.

VOCALIZATIONS

They are usually not singing on migration. The one bird that sings in migration is Willow. The others tend not to. But they give call notes and the call notes can be quite helpful.

Call a pretty unique sharp peek which sounds like the bip note of a Pygmy Nuthatch. Something like it may be given by Alder Flycatcher but certainly not by any of the regularly occurring *Empidonax* that we have here.

Gray Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Pinyon-juniper habitat with sagebrush in the Great Basin region.

Occurs as a migrant along the immediate coast and inland.

Can be found along with Hammond's sometimes at Mt Diablo.

Joe's seen them in Briones Regional Park occasionally.

The pinyon-juniper flats around Mono Lake are a very good place to look for it in June.

Late April and early May in the foothills of the Bay Area. Rare along the immediate coast, hardly ever at Pt Reyes. Occasionally in migration in the deserts.

Winters in tiny numbers in southern CA along the coast in some of the parks there.

Has been wintering this year in the east bay, above the Oakland Zoo in Knowland Park. Probably the first winter record for the Bay Area. That bird had an all pale mandible, did not have the typical gray tip. Up to 15% have an all pale mandible.

Also one last fall at Coyote Hills Regional Park. They do come through in the fall and very rarely in the winter. Southern CA gets them more regularly.

FIELD MARKS

Very similar to Dusky. About the taxonomic history of Gray and Dusky see link on Joe's class website.

The Gray Flycatcher is really hard to tell when it's lying on its back in a museum tray. When its out there in the field it is easy to tell because it dips its tail downwards slowly and then up like a Phoebe instead of up first and then down like a Dusky or any of the other *Empidonax*.

In addition the Gray Flycatcher frequently perches more horizontally to give it room to dip its tail down.

The largest of the *Empidonax* and it has the longest bill.

Bill usually pale with a crisply defined black tip.

Eye ring usually quite faint.

Very little yellow on the underparts, quite pale.

Rather drab looking wing pattern.

Gray and Dusky tend to have quite a bit of white on the outer web of the outer tail feathers, the other species do not. But it is not a reliable field mark. It can look white on the other species when it's backlit, it's definitely paler than the rest of the tail.

VOCALIZATIONS

Song pretty different from Dusky.

A double note followed by a higher single note: chullup-heep.

Nothing like the harsh complicated song given by Dusky, which is much more like Hammond's.

Call note a sharp whit-note almost identical to Dusky.

Dusky Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Higher in the mountains than Gray as a breeding bird, usually in Manzanita, but any kind of open forest area can support it.

A bird of the high Sierra. Outnumbers Hammond's Flycatcher as a breeding bird. More about it in the Sierra see above under Hammond's.

In Yosemite they often sit in the open, more like a pewee and which a nice long tail which is fairly expressive and is flipped around quite a bit.

Breeds in general further south than Hammond's.

Decidedly a less common migrant in the lowlands than Hammond's.

When you are in the desert and the flycatchers are coming through you can have lots of Hammond's, you have relatively few Dusky.

Nest in a crotch.

FIELD MARKS

Very similar to Gray.

Joe generally identifies them by eliminating all other species.

In general Joe thinks of Hammond's of being big-headed and short-tailed and of Dusky and Gray as being small-headed and long-tailed.

Bill long, of some significance in size. Not puny like Hammond's.

Mandible intermediate. Fair amount of dark, but is bigger and usually has more pale on it than a Hammond's but less pale than a Gray. The dark tends to be blended instead of a sharply defined black tip.

Sibley points out white extending over the top of the bill. The presence or absence of pale lores is not a useful way of distinguishing *Empidonax*.

Relatively long tail.

Usually Gray has the most white in the outer tail feathers and Dusky is close. But beware of other species being backlit!

Primary projection generally short.

Tend to pump their tail in a rather unexcited way. Pumping it up and down and fanning it a little bit. The wings do not usually flip out of the way when the tail is being pumped.

In migration, if you see a bird that is pumping its tail up and its wings are not moving you might be looking at a Dusky or maybe a Least. In general Dusky is not as emphatic as Least or Hammond's, much more lazy about its tail actions.

When the birds are singing on territory they will flip their wings. They jump in the air and flip their wings and flip their tails around. But that is when they are on territory and there are other Dusky around and they don't like it and they get a little more energetic. At Pt Reyes birders get into arguments about whether they are Dusky or Gray. You would think that that would be a fairly straightforward thing because of the difference in the tail pumping. Here is how you tell: on Gray the tail goes down and up and stops. Dusky keeps moving and does not stop either at the top or at the bottom. If you cannot decide whether the tail is going down or up because it's doing both, that should be a Dusky. The ones that there are arguments about are Dusky, when you have a Gray it should be pretty clear-cut.

VOCALIZATIONS

Whit-call not distinguishable from Gray, but Gray can be distinguished by behavior.

Willow, which also has a whit-note, can usually be distinguished by plumage because of its brown coloration and its lack of an eye ring.

Least has a whit-note which is very snappy and can usually be eliminated by a combination of vocalization and plumage.

Song very, very similar to Hammond's. Selitt bschurr selitt pit.

On the breeding grounds the males in addition to singing have another call in the evening, it sounds bee-bee-bee-bee-ick. Different from any other vocalization by any other *Empidonax*.

Also a selitt note that is frequently given by the Dusky either as part of the song or by itself. Probably also pretty diagnostic.