

Least Flycatcher *Empidonax minimus*



Folk Name: Chebeck

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Edges of woods and brushy places

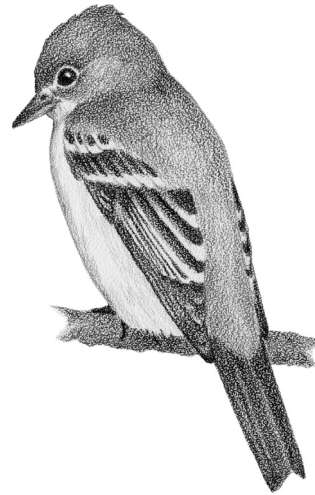
The Least Flycatcher is a migrant in our region, and as its name suggests, it is the smallest member of the Tyrannidae family recorded here. This diminutive flycatcher averages just over 5 inches long—only about half an inch bigger than a Carolina Chickadee. They breed in open woodlands in the mountains of North Carolina and northward, and their breeding activity is considered to be quite unique for two reasons. First, they nest in “clumped” social groups with the individual breeding groups scattered throughout their breeding range. Second, they spend a relatively short time on their breeding grounds—only about 64 days. After breeding, they quickly move south to wintering sites in southern Mexico and Central America.

The presence of this migrant in the Central Carolina region is not well known. Only about a dozen Least Flycatchers were reported here during the twentieth century. Elizabeth Clarkson was the first to report this species, finding a Least Flycatcher moving through her gardens at Wing Haven in Charlotte in September 1949. The next four reports came from Charlotte Spring Bird Counts.

Jack Hamilton found two on the Charlotte count held on May 9, 1964. Two years later, his count party reported hearing and seeing another pair of Least Flycatchers on the count held on May 7, 1966. A decade later Hamilton’s count party again heard a Least Flycatcher calling and then later located it while conducting the Charlotte SBC on May 7, 1977. Lastly, Randy Cross saw and heard a Least Flycatcher singing on the count held May 3, 1980.



Least Flycatcher at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge.
(Kevin Metcalf)



David Wright found one in Charlotte on October 3, 1984, and “studied carefully” another in Mecklenburg County on September 19, 1987. Taylor Piephoff reported a bird moving through Mecklenburg County on September 12, 1990. A year later, Bill Hilton Jr. mist-netted and banded two Least Flycatchers at Hilton Pond Center in York County on the “surprisingly early date” of August 17, 1991. The last record from the twentieth century is a bird found by Taylor Piephoff while he was visiting the Wallace Dairy Farm in northeastern Mecklenburg County on August 22, 1992.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been more than two dozen reports of Least Flycatcher submitted from throughout the region. Several of these reports have been supported by photographs. Reports have come from Catawba, Cabarrus, Union, and Anson County, and Least Flycatchers were photographed in Mecklenburg County and the Uwharrie National Forest.

It is possible that birders have become more aware of this tiny bird’s *Che-bek* song and repetitive *whit* call note or that they have become more willing to attempt to differentiate the subtle field marks that must be used to separate the different *Empidonax* flycatchers when the birds are silent. Since 2000, spring reports have ranged from 6 to 11 May, and fall birds have been reported between 13 August and 23 October. Unfortunately, none of the three reports submitted of birds in August (13, 31, 31) mention confirming the identification of Least Flycatcher by hearing its call.

Kevin Metcalf provided this excellent description of a Least Flycatcher at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on September 13, 2014. He photographed the bird and

remarked that this was the first Least Flycatcher he had seen in Mecklenburg County despite seven years of regular bird study there:

This individual was in fresh fall plumage. Very active, perching low in small trees and shrubs in a semi-open area. Nervously flicked wings and tail on occasion—tail motion a quick upward flick. Note 1. Obvious whitish eye-ring which is thicker behind the eye and somewhat almond shaped. 2. Fairly

contrasty wings 3. Very short primary projection 4. Bill relatively short and deep, which appears dark distally on the lower mandible (not as bright orange as many other empids). Also note the outer rectrices are longer than the inner, giving a slight notch to the tail. Willow/Alder (Traill's) often show more rounded tail tip—kind of like the difference between a Sharp-shinned and a Cooper's Hawk. Call note briefly heard (whit call) but for the most part was silent.