

First Record of Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) in South Carolina

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On the morning of 12 October 2018, Szarek located a Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) near the corner of Jetty Drive and Prat Road in Huntington Beach State Park, Georgetown County, South Carolina. This sighting represents the first record for South Carolina.

Discovery

Szarek stopped to look for a kingfisher frequently seen just north of the Nature Center site where an opening in the scrub and trees affords a view of the Oaks Creek saltmarsh. She located an unusual looking flycatcher sitting far back from the road. After a couple of minutes of observation, Szarek was able to exclude the expected Great Crested Flycatcher, as well as most of the other locally common flycatchers.

Szarek stated: “The bird had a relatively large bill, yellow belly, no white on the tail feathers, and an olive back. The fieldmarks fit Tropical/Couch’s Kingbird, and naturally, I was quite thrilled. I have been a birder for a couple of years, and this was my first big find!”

Szarek notified Ritch Lilly, and Rich notified the greater birding community. This allowed numbers of other birders to see the kingbird, which by this time had become active, chasing large dragonflies.

Observations and Identification

The Tropical Kingbird was observed, discussed, and described for over 10 hours by several birders. Many photographs were taken of the perched bird. Using online resources and field guides, the group eliminated several *Tyrannus* species.

In the field, the Tropical Kingbird can be separated from Cassin’s and Western Kingbirds. Cassin’s Kingbird presents a uniformly medium-gray head, chest and back, setting off a white malar bar. The Cassin’s tail is black with a white tip. The Western Kingbird’s head, nape, mantle, and chest are light gray showing less contrast with the white malar and more contrast with the dark lores and eye, presenting a thin-masked appearance. The tail of a Western Kingbird is blackish with white edges. The bills of Cassin’s and Western are both relatively small in comparison with Tropical Kingbird.

In contrast, the kingbird we observed had a brown tail with no white edging or tip. Its head was light gray, fading gradually into a whitish malar and throat. The thin mask was a shade or two darker than the gray face, but not black. The bill was hefty, long, and straight. The chest was yellow with an olive wash, not gray. Other field marks noted by observers were the olive back, a belly yellow though the vent, and a deeply notched tail. The tails of Cassin’s and Western Kingbirds appear un-notched when folded.

Based on observable physical characteristics, the Tropical Kingbird cannot be distinguished from the Couch's Kingbird, even with excellent photographs. So far, recent attempts to establish diagnostic markers based on bill and primary feather morphology have been inconclusive (Garvey and Iliff 2010). Fortunately, these kingbird species have distinct vocalizations, and the bird of 12 October 2018 often gave a high-pitched sputtering twitter in three or four notes, its typical call. Couch's typically give a squeaky, single "tik", sometimes followed by a raspy "wheer" (Stouffer and Chesser 1998). No single notes were observed. Ed Blitch, Pam Ford, and Brad Sale obtained recordings, and all observers heard the calls well.

Distribution and Recent Vagrancy

Fairly common and widespread throughout its range, the Tropical Kingbird prefers open country with trees and scrub and has adapted to human landscapes like parks and farms. In suitable habitat, the species occurs regularly from the southeastern United States to Argentina's Rio Negro (Stouffer and Chesser 1998).

In the United States, the northern subspecies *T.m. satrapa* breeds in southeastern Arizona and southernmost Texas. In the fall (September into November), the Tropical Kingbird is a regular, annual visitor along the California coast, and has been recorded with increasing frequency since the 1990s in Oregon and Washington (Stouffer and Chesser 1998). The Washington Bird Records Committee removed Tropical Kingbird from its review list in 2011 (Matt Bartels, pers. comm.)

Along the east coast, the Tropical Kingbird was a very rare fall vagrant until the early 2000s. The first record was a remarkably well-studied specimen collected from Scarborough Marsh, Maine, in 1915 (Norton 1916). Bird records committees along the East Coast have accepted 13 reports in the past 30 years, with five in the last five years and at least five more currently pending. North Carolina has accepted four records of Tropical Kingbird: 29 December 1985 to 3 January 1986 at Lake Mattamuskeet (LeGrand et al. 1990); 29 October to 18 November 2001 at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (LeGrand et al. 2002); 19 November to 26 December 2005 at Pettigew State Park (LeGrand et al. 2006); and 3 June 2017 at North River Farms (Campbell et al. 2018).

Conclusion

The South Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted this as the state's first record of Tropical Kingbird based on reports submitted by Erinn Szarek, Ed Blitch, Pam Ford, Craig Watson, John Cox, and Frank Lawkins (Givens et al. 2019). The South Carolina Bird Records Committee is currently reviewing a report of Tropical Kingbird observed and photographed by Pam Ford and Craig Watson at Fort Moultrie, Charleston, SC, on 16 June 2019 (Southern 2019).

This first record fits a pattern of vagrancy along the East Coast that is either increasing or is better detected. For now, observers must continue to rely on vocalization to separate Tropical Kingbird from the rarer but still possible Couch's Kingbird. As more birders learn to use mobile devices to record bird sounds, identifications are more certain and specific. Those skills may be the key to the first record of Couch's Kingbird in the Carolinas.



*Tropical
Kingbird,
12 Oct 2018,
Georgetown Co,
SC.
Photo by Craig
Watson.*

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