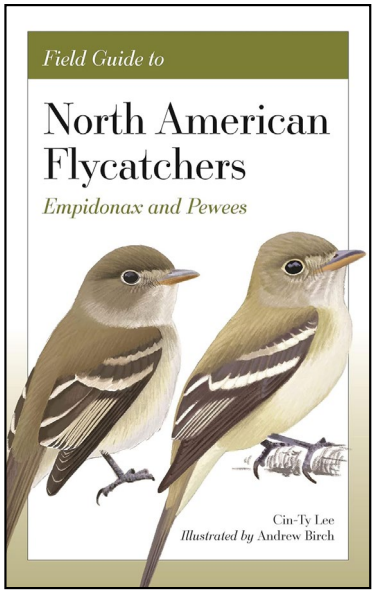
BOOK REVIEW

NEW GUIDE TO CHALLENGING FLYCATCHERS

BY CHRIS BENESH

Field Guide to North American Flycatchers: Empidonax and Pewees, by Cin-Ty Lee. Illustrated by Andrew Birch. 2023. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK. 169 pages. Flexibound. $19.95. ISBN 9780691240626.



Up until now, perhaps the biggest gap in all of the North American bird identification literature has been a thorough treatment of the tyrant flycatchers. At last, Cin-Ty Lee and Andrew Birch have changed that with the arrival of their *Field Guide to North American Flycatchers*, or should I say, guides. Rather than a single volume covering all of the species recorded in the United States and Canada, the publisher has opted to cover the Tyrannidae in several volumes. The first one in the series is out and includes treatment of the *Contopus* pewees and the *Empidonax* flycatchers, along with the closely related Tufted Flycatcher in the genus *Mitrephanes*. The book is handsomely laid out with large illustrations crafted by Birch and is divided into 2 sections.

The first section is titled "How to Use This Guide", and is an excellent overview of how to go about identifying pewees and *Empidonax*, tackling the various morphological characteristics (e.g. crown shape, forehead angle, bill length, lower mandible color, tail length, tail width, primary projection, wingbar contrast, wing panel contrast, upper/underpart contrast, eye-ring, overall coloration), as well as behavior, voice, molt, habitat preferences, and migration timing. There is a wealth of useful information here. Reading and rereading these pages will prepare the observer on how to best take on the thorny task of identifying this group.

The second section includes the species accounts. These are somewhat brief, focusing on the essentials, with a heavy emphasis on the illustrations. There is good use of similar species comparisons, e.g., differentiating wood-pewees from Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus cooperi*); wood-pewees from western Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*); Acadian Flycatcher (*E. virescens*) from Yellow-bellied (*E. flaviventris*) and Least (*E. minimus*); Willow Flycatcher from Alder (*E. alnorum*); Western Flycatcher (*E. difficilis*) from Yellow-bellied; Hammond's Flycatcher (*E. hammondii*) from Dusky (*E. oberholseri*), Least, Gray (*E. wrightii*), etc. While much of this information has been touched on in various identification articles, most of these are out of print and hard to track down. Here it has been distilled into a single, well-crafted resource. Another great feature of the species accounts are detailed range maps and bar charts showing migration timing, often an important component of flycatcher identification. There is also liberal use of spectrograms/sonograms, which can be a helpful tool for interpreting vocalizations.

The guide does an excellent job summarizing the complicated situation with Cordilleran (*E. occidentalis*) and Pacific-slope (*E. difficilis*) Flycatchers and presciently placed them under the umbrella of Western Flycatcher (Figure 1). Subsequent to the publication of this guide, the 2 were lumped together as Western Flycatcher based on published findings by Alec Hopping who has been studying the respective populations where their ranges meet. Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Cordilleran Flycatcher are vocally distinctive when one examines remote populations away from their

contact zone (Hopping 2022). For example, birds breeding in the San Francisco region sound distinct from birds in the sky islands of southeast Arizona. However, exhaustive field work carried out since Western Flycatcher was split in 1989 has found extensive overlap ranging from eastern Washington and southern British Columbia east to Alberta, Idaho, and Montana. Birds in this contact zone are not genetically distinct and possess muddled, intermediate vocalizations, suggesting that reproductive isolating mechanisms break down where the 2 come into contact. As a result of these findings, the American Ornithological Society's North American Checklist Committee voted to again treat the 2 as a single species—Western Flycatcher—in July 2023 (Chesser et al. 2023).

Figure 1. Fresh plumaged juvenile Western Flycatcher shows brownish cast to plumage and buffy-toned wingbars typical of many young Western Flycatchers. Gilbert, Arizona (20 September 2023). Photo by Chris Benesh

Lee and Birch offer detailed coverage of their respective vocalizations and the complicated situation that occurs where their ranges meet. While most consider the 2 populations to be impossible to identify visually in field conditions, the authors propose a few subtle plumage differences between the 2 (e.g., coloration of the wingbars). However, Cordilleran is mentioned as tending toward yellower wingbars in the text yet illustrated with comparatively whitish wingbars. Whichever is the case, I suspect more scrutiny in field situations is needed to test the validity of presumptive plumage differences.

While this is overall an excellent guide, I did have a few quibbles with various points in addition to the aforementioned. Under the topic of tail movements, the authors state that "Pewees (except for Cuban) rarely pump/flick their tails." In my experience, all of the *Contopus* pewees, as well as Tufted Flycatcher (*M. phaeocercus*) routinely quiver their tails up and down rapidly when they first alight on a perch. There is also reference to a difference in perching posture between Eastern (*C. virens*) and Western (*C. sordidulus*) Wood-pewees, a difference first noted by the authors several years ago (Lee et al. 2008). This is misleading as there are no real demonstrable differences in the manner in which they perch.

There are also a few issues with each of the extralimital species accounts. In North America (south through Panama), Tufted Flycatcher is comprised of 2 subspecies (*M. p. phaeocercus* and *M. p. aurantiiventris*) that are likely full cryptic species that differ in habitat, coloration, and importantly in voice (Howell and Dyer 2022). The northern population ranges in from northern Mexico south to northwestern Nicaragua in pine-oak habitat. The southern population is found in cloud forests in Costa Rica and Panama. The account is complicated by the inclusion of the more southerly vocal type in the voice description. The first song type mentioned, "a rapid succession of 'pip' notes," belongs to the southern population and would never be uttered by Tufted Flycatchers showing up in Arizona or Texas.

Similarly, the Cuban Pewee (*C. caribaeus*) account is an oversimplification of an interesting phenomenon. Cuban Pewee is a stray to Florida, with some birds coming from the Bahamas and others from Cuba. The Cuban birds and Bahamian birds are noticeably different in appearance and also in voice (and likely are 2 cryptic species). Cuban birds are darker, longer billed, and more crested while the Bahamian birds are shorter billed, yellower below, and cuter, with a more rounded to slightly crested look. The guide illustrates a Cuban-type bird, and the vocal description gives examples of the Bahamian-type call and Cuban-type song. The song of Bahamian birds and calls of Cuban birds are not mentioned. To their credit, however, the voices described are the 2 vocalizations most frequently documented in Florida to date, based on a review of eBird submissions.

A small error crept into an otherwise excellent Pine Flycatcher (Figure 2) account. In the vocal section, mention is made of Pine Flycatcher (*E. affinis*) occasionally giving a high "tzeet" call like Cordilleran. This was news to me, having seen Pine Flycatcher on a number of occasions. As far as I can tell, this can be traced back to an eBird report and recording from Veracruz labeled as Pine Flycatcher. The photos associated with the audio appear to be a Western (Cordilleran)

Flycatcher, which breeds in the area. The Pine Flycatcher account also does not mention the narrow base to the bill, an important structural characteristic separating it from the more widely based bill of Western Flycatcher.

On page 127, the bill illustrations for Least and Dusky Flycatchers are switched.

The guide includes "The Field Mark Matrix" a table cross-referencing each species with a number of different characters. Some might find this useful, though I found the information not easily assimilated in the manner presented.

To sum it all up, this was an immense undertaking that was expertly executed. Illustrating flycatchers is notoriously difficult, and Andrew Birch has done a great job of capturing the subtle structural differences between species. This is a must for anyone who loves flycatchers or wants to take on the difficult challenge of identifying them.

Figure 2. This Pine Flycatcher (13 June 2016), the first record for Arizona and the United States, was discovered in the Santa Rita Mountains on 28 May 2016 where it remained until at least 7 July 2016. Photo by Chris Benesh

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