

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**WILLOW FLYCATCHER**

JULY 2024

The Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) breeds throughout much of North America. The southwestern subspecies (*E. t. extimus*) breeding range occurs in Arizona, southern California, southern Nevada, southern Utah, southern Colorado, New Mexico, western Texas, and extreme northwestern Mexico. It winters in southern Mexico, Central America, and northern South America.

In 1995 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the southwestern subspecies as federally endangered. It cited loss, alteration, and fragmentation of native riparian breeding habitat as the reason for Willow Flycatcher decline in the Southwest. By 2012 the known population had substantially increased. However, the numbers were still below the thresholds set by the USFWS in its 2002 Recovery Plan. Since 2012, the numbers have not substantially changed. Over half of the known southwestern subspecies breeding territories are in 5 locations, including 3 in Arizona: Roosevelt Lake, confluence of the Gila and San Pedro rivers, and the upper Gila River.



Willow Flycatcher, Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, Mohave County, 18 July 2019, photo by George Cummins

One of the major challenges is protecting the riparian cottonwood-willow habitat where the flycatchers nest, particularly from wildfires and overgrazing by cattle. Tamarisk has likely occurred since the late 1800s in Arizona and has expanded since the early 1900s due to the alteration of rivers and groundwater. It flourishes along rivers, and nesting flycatchers have taken advantage of its dense vegetation and vertical branches. However, since Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services introduced the exotic tamarisk beetle in Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Texas, it has moved into Arizona and across much of the Willow Flycatcher's southwestern breeding range, destroying tamarisk and posing yet another threat to the bird's recovery.