

Status and Occurrence of Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*) is a brilliant coloured passerine found breeding in the forests of Eastern North America. In Canada, this species breeds locally from eastern-central Alberta, primarily in Parkland Natural Region, with some records in the southeastern corner of the Boreal Forest Natural Region (Penner 2007), east through central Saskatchewan (Smith 1996), to southern Manitoba, into the extreme southern portions of western Ontario and the southern portion of eastern Ontario, southernmost Quebec, excluding the northern Gaspé Peninsula (Gauthier and Aubry 1996), throughout New Brunswick, most of Nova Scotia except in the northeast, and occasionally on Prince Edward Island (Miller and Lanyon 2014). The breeding range of the Great Crested Flycatcher extends into the Eastern United States south along the Atlantic Coast to southern Florida, including the Florida Keys where birds are found mostly on the Upper Keys (Stevenson and Anderson 1994), and the Gulf Coast in southern Texas where it also breeds west to about Roberts County in the Texas panhandle and Real County in southern Texas, north into the eastern panhandle of western Oklahoma (Reinking 2004), western Kansas where this species is very local in riparian gallery forest areas (Busby and Zimmerman 2001), along the Platte River of northeastern Colorado west to Weld County (Kingery 1998), central Nebraska (Johnsgard 1979), northeastern and southwestern South Dakota (Peterson 1995), eastern North Dakota, and locally in central North Dakota in the Turtle Mountains of McHenry County, and along the southern portion of the Missouri River (Stewart 1975). The Great Crested Flycatcher might also breed locally west of its main breeding range in northeastern Coahuila, Mexico (Urban 1959).

The Great Crested Flycatcher winters regularly in southern Florida, primarily from Lee, Highlands, and Palm Beach Counties south through the Upper Keys, but rarely farther north in peninsular Florida or in the Lower Keys (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). The main winter range extends from southern Mexico in southern Veracruz, northern Oaxaca, and throughout the Yucatán Peninsula and south throughout Central America to eastern Panama (Miller and Lanyon 2014). It is absent from the higher elevations in Chiapas, Mexico, south (Howell and Webb 2010). In Mexico, this species is most common on the Atlantic slope (Howell and Webb 2010). In Costa Rica, this species is most common on the Pacific slope (Miller and Lanyon 2014). The Great Crested Flycatcher has been recorded wintering to about 1,400 m in Costa Rica and to 1,050 m in Panama (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, Stiles and Skutch 1989, Howell and Webb 2010). This species also winters in northwestern to western South America and in northern Colombia, west of east Andes (Hilty and Brown 1986) as well as in northwestern Venezuela (Hilty 2003). There are also a few recent sight records from the canopy and borders

of the humid forest in Napo in northeastern Ecuador (Paynter 1995, Freile *et al.* 2013, Ridgely and Greenfield 2001).

The Great Crested Flycatcher is a rare winter resident in Cuba (Miller and Lanyon 2014). This species is very rare during the winter months in Bermuda (Amos 1991). It is important to note that all winter reports from anywhere in Canada or the United States outside of Florida should be documented very carefully because of possible confusion with other “*Myiarchus*” flycatchers, particularly the more likely Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) (Miller and Lanyon 2014).

Along the west coast of North America the Great Crested Flycatcher is a casual to accidental vagrant that occurs for the most part in the fall migration. In California, there are 59 accepted records for the state by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Incredibly, there are no records for Oregon (OFO 2012) or Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). The Great Crested Flycatcher is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 3 fall records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). In Alaska, the Great Crested Flycatcher is accidental with 3 accepted state records with first a specimen from Middleton Island on September 29, 1990 (Gibson and Kessel 1992), and another seen by many observers and photographed at Juneau from September 29 – October 11, 2009 (Heinl and Piston 2009). The most recent record is of a bird photographed at Petersburg on October 11, 2013 (Heinl and Piston 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Great Crested Flycatcher is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a large species that is listed in most field guides as measuring 21 cm (8.5 inches) in length, but adult males are larger than females measuring 18-21 cm with adult females measuring 17-20 cm (Miller and Lanyon 2014). On average birds weigh in at 34 grams (1.2 ounces) (Miller and Lanyon 2014). This is a large, noisy flycatcher that, when excited, may raise its crown-feathers to form a crest (Miller and Lanyon 2014).

Adult birds have a large black bill with a fleshy coloured base (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head is dark olive-brown that extends down the back to the rump; there is a distinct crest on the head (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are dark (Sibley 2000). The throat is a dark gray that extends down to the upper chest (Sibley 2000). There is a sharp contrast between the gray breast and the yellow on the lower belly (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This bright yellow extends from the lower breast down the flanks to the vent (Sibley 2000). The primaries have bright cinnamon-rufous edges to the inner webs (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rest of the wing is dark except for 2 distinct light wing bars and light white edges to the tertial feathers (Dunn and

Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are black (Sibley 2000). The tail is long and bright cinnamon-rufous, and is fairly extensive on the inner webs of the tail feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Juvenile plumage is held from April to September (Sibley 2000). These birds look almost the exact same as adult birds, but have much more extensive white edges to the tertial feathers (Miller and Lanyon 2014).

The song of the Great Crested Flycatcher consists of alternating phrases of “*quitta, queeto, quitta*” (Sibley 2000). The call is diagnostic and a distinctive “*whee-eeep*” (Sibley 2000). Other calls include a very rough *krreeep*”, a lower softer, dry sounding “*krriip*” and a low sharp “*kwip*” (Sibley 2000). Sometimes all these calls are combined together to make a “*krreeep, krreeep, kwip-kwip-kwip-kwip-kwipkweep-kweep-krriip*” (Sibley 2000).

The identification of “*Myiarchus Flycatchers*” is tricky and requires careful attention to detail in distinguishing subtle field marks. It is recommended that observers consult Sibley (2000) or Dunn and Alderfer (2011) for more comprehensive and in-depth descriptions and notations of the best distinguishing field marks between similar and potential vagrant species to British Columbia. All species of *Myiarchus* are best confirmed by vocal characteristics if the bird is calling (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) does occur regularly in British Columbia and should be watched for every year throughout the province (Toochin and Fenneman 2014a). They are different enough that observers should not have any difficulty in identifying this species in the province (Toochin and Fenneman 2014a). This species makes a distinct “*ki-brrrnk-brrr*” call (Sibley 2000). It is encouraged that observers try to photograph all records of this species in British Columbia due to the difficulty of “*Myiarchus Flycatcher*” identification (Toochin and Fenneman 2014a). For more in-depth information on the Ash-throated Flycatcher in British Columbia, read Toochin and Fenneman (2014a).

The Brown-crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*) is a very similar looking species to the Great Crested Flycatcher, but occurs from localized areas of eastern California, localized areas of Nevada, and localized areas of Utah with the species most commonly found in Arizona and southern Texas (Sibley 2000). This species has never been recorded in British Columbia, but should be kept in mind when encountering a “*Myiarchus Flycatcher*” in British Columbia. This species makes a distinct descending raucous “*keerp*” call that is usually repeated in a series (Sibley 2000).

The Dusky-capped Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer*) is found in south-eastern Arizona and south-western New Mexico. This species is small and very distinctly different looking from the other species of “*Myiarchus Flycatchers*” (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are no records for British Columbia, but this species wanders frequently to California with 94 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee, and could be a potential vagrant in the future to the province (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014).

All species of “*Myiarchus Flycatchers*” are best confirmed by vocal characteristics if the bird is calling (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Great Crested Flycatcher is an accidental vagrant species in British Columbia with only 3 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). The first record was of an immature bird found by Rick Toochin on Triangle Island and was seen from September 29-30, 1994 (Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). A detailed account of the sighting was published in the now defunct magazine Birders Journal in Volume 4, pages 106-109 (Toochin 1995). This observation was accepted as the first provincial record by the authors of the Birds of British Columbia in Volume 3, but was published incorrectly as having been seen in 1995 (Campbell *et al.* 1997). The second provincial record was of an immature bird found in the Blaeberry Valley north of Golden by Doug Leighton on September 27, 2010 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The third record was of an immature bird that was originally misidentified as an Ash-throated Flycatcher by a couple of inexperienced birders from Chilliwack (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). Given the similarity of the Great Crested to Ash-throated Flycatcher, it is understandable that people not familiar with these species, might not recognize them at first glance (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). This record, as with past provincial “*Myiarchus Flycatcher*” records, impresses the need of observers to try to photograph any probable “Ash-throated Flycatcher” as there is always a chance it could be a much rarer species (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). Fortunately, because the photographs in the Chilliwack instance were made public, the authors got the word out that the bird was in fact, a rarer Great Crested Flycatcher, the first photographed provincial record; and others were able to see the bird (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). This bird was found in Chilliwack at Island 22 Regional Park by Gord Gadsden and Chris MacDonald, and was seen on October 29 & November 1, 2013 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Photographs of this record can be viewed here http://s17.photobucket.com/user/LaForge_/media/2012/_0132679_zps0e47edbc.jpg.html.

The timing of these records is mirrored perfectly in California where there are over 55 state records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In California, the Great Crested Flycatcher has occurred from September 4 to November 2 with 80% of the records occurring in

a narrow time frame of September 16 to October 14 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Of note, all the birds that have been identified to age in California have been immature or first fall birds which is a strange anomaly as it would be expected that the odd adult bird would likely turn up (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). This anomaly is also reflected in all the British Columbia records and all the Alaska records which all fall into the peak time of Great Crested Flycatcher vagrancy in California as well (Gibson and Kessel 1992, Heintz and Piston 2013, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). It is interesting to note that there are no records for this species from the Peace River Region of British Columbia, given that they have expanded their breeding range across into central Alberta in Parkland and Boreal Forests (Miller and Lanyon 2014). The Great Crested Flycatcher has been expanding its breeding range over the past several decades in western Canada (Smith 1996, Miller and Lanyon 2014). In Saskatchewan, the breeding range has expanded from the Walworth area in the 1940s, to central Saskatchewan by 1966, and now extends to the western border, perhaps because the trees there have been protected from fire and are now large enough to provide cavities for breeding (Smith 1996, Miller and Lanyon 2014). This species was first recorded in Alberta in 1939 and its first breeding record was in 1976 (Miller and Lanyon 2014). The breeding range in Alberta is not that different from British Columbia, and observers that travel to the Peace Country in the breeding season should watch for this species as a potential vagrant (R. Worona Pers. Comm.). It is very likely that there will be future records of the Great Crested Flycatcher in British Columbia. This species is possible anywhere and should be photographed and reported if encountered.



Figure 1: Great Crested Flycatcher adult found near Lake Kissimmee in Florida on May 18, 2012. Photo © Michael Ashbee <http://www.mikeashbeephotography.com/>.

Table 1: Records of Great Crested Flycatcher for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) immature September 29-30, 1994: Rick Toochin, Mike Toochin: Triangle Island (Jones and Cooke 1994, Toochin 1995)
- 2.(1) immature September 27, 2010: Doug Leighton : Blaeberry Valley north of Golden (Charlesworth 2011a)
- 3.(1) immature October 29 & November 1, 2013: Identified by Rick Toochin, Don Cecile; found by Gord Gadsden, Chris McDonald (photo) Island 22 Regional Park, Chilliwack (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)

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