

## **The First Record of Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin.** Submitted: April 15, 2018.

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) is a medium to large sized passerine with a very small breeding range extending from the extreme southwestern United States, south through western Mexico to Oaxaca (Lowther *et al.* 2017). The first Thick-billed Kingbird for the United States was found in 1958 and eventually became the first breeding record for the country as well (Monson and Phillips 1964).

In the United States the Thick-billed Kingbird is found predominantly breeding in the southeastern part of Arizona, including Santa Cruz County, Pajarito Mountains, Guadalupe Mountains, lower Santa Cruz River drainage, and along the San Pedro River north to Pinal County; also occurs in Guadalupe Canyon of Cochise County, and Skeleton Canyon in the Peloncillo Mountains of Cochise County (Arizona Game and Fish Department 1988, Arizona Game and Fish Department 1996, Corman 2005i). This species is classified as a casual vagrant elsewhere in southern Arizona during breeding season (Monson and Phillips 1964). The Thick-billed Kingbird also occurs in Hidalgo County in extreme southwestern New Mexico, including Antelope Wells and the foothills of Animas Mountains (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 1996). A breeding pair was also documented in western Texas at Big Bend National Park, in Brewster County from the years 1988–1991 (Benson and Arnold 2001), and the Upper Texas Coast (Lockwood 2005, 2006).

The Thick-billed Kingbird is mostly found within Mexico, where the breeding range extends from the eastern half of Sonora, western Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and western Durango south along the Pacific slope to Guerrero, México, Morelos, southern Puebla, and central Oaxaca, into southern Guatemala (Howell and Webb 2010, American Ornithologists' Union 1998a).

Like other kingbirds, the Thick-billed Kingbird forages in open habitats and captures insects on aerial hawking flights (Lowther *et al.* 2017). In southeastern Arizona, this species occurs in gallery woodland along perennial or intermittent streams and rivers; occupied drainages have broader floodplains and it is seldom found in steeper, narrower mountain canyons (Corman 2005i, Lowther *et al.* 2017). Thick-billed Kingbird in a recent atlas project were most often detected near riparian woodland edges and clearings with large Arizona sycamores (*Platanus wrightii*) or Fremont cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii*), but also foraged on open brushy slopes nearby (Corman 2005i, Lowther *et al.* 2017). This species was found in drainage areas that lacked large sycamores, and often used decadent cottonwood stands with clumps of mistletoe (*Phoradendron*) for nest placement with nesting also occurring in tall cottonwoods

surrounding manmade ponds (Corman 2005i, Lowther *et al.* 2017). Other tree species typical of breeding habitats were: netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*), Goodding willow (*Salix gooddingii*), velvet mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*), Arizona walnut (*Juglans major*), velvet ash (*Fraxinus velutina*), and sometimes tamarisk (*Tamarix* spp.) (Corman 2005i, Lowther *et al.* 2017).

In Sonora, Mexico, the Thick-billed Kingbird uses large deciduous trees in open areas within tropical deciduous forest, and is less common in riparian cottonwoods, willows, and walnuts (*Juglans*) within subtropical thorn scrub, desert scrub, and oak (*Quercus*) country (Russell and Monson 1998). In Oaxaca, Mexico, this species is a permanent resident in riparian areas within arid subtropical scrub at Tamazulapan del Progreso at 1,830 m and arid tropical scrub in San Miguel Sola de Vega valley at 1,070 m (Binford 1989a). In Colima, Mexico, the Thick-billed Kingbird is most common in thorn forest characterized by *Acacia*, *Bombax*, *Bougainvillea*, *Cassia*, *Ceiba*, and *Mimosa*, with 9–12 m canopy height (Schaldach 1963).

In Arizona, migration starts with a few individuals that begin to arrive in mid-April, but the species is not expected much before early May (Corman 2005i). In Sonora, Mexico, migration begins about April 10 in the south in the Alamos area, but the northern breeding areas may not be occupied until early May (Russell and Monson 1998). The Thick-billed Kingbird has been recorded by at least May 7 near Nogales in Sonora (Phillips *et al.* 1964a).

Within most local populations, it appears that this includes year-round resident individuals as well (Lowther *et al.* 2017). However, even within the "resident" portion of species' range, it is possible that some individuals are migratory (Lowther *et al.* 2017). The northernmost populations in Arizona, New Mexico, and northern Sonora, do vacate the breeding range during winter months, although where these populations overwinter currently remains unknown (Lowther *et al.* 2017).

In Sonora, Mexico, fall departure of the Thick-billed Kingbird begins in early September and continues into October (Russell and Monson 1998). This species has been recorded near Nogales in Sonora, through September 13-14 (Phillips *et al.* 1964a).

The Thick-billed Kingbird winters in Mexico from southeastern Sonora south through the remainder of breeding range and into southeastern Oaxaca and southwestern Chiapas (Lowther *et al.* 2017). This species is rarely recorded farther south to south-central Guatemala (Howell and Webb 2010, American Ornithologists' Union 1998a).

In the United States, the Thick-billed Kingbird is a casual fall and winter visitor in southern California (Small 1994), along the lower Colorado River between California and Arizona (Monson and Phillips 1964, Rosenberg *et al.* 1991). There are 23 accepted records for the state by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2017). The majority of these records have occurred in the late fall in October/November staying into the winter months (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2017) from the southern regions of the state such as; San Diego, Riverside, Orange, Los Angeles, Inyo counties and as far north as San Francisco (McCaskie *et al.* 1967, Small 1994, Unitt 2004c, Pike and Compton 2010). Other winter records in the United States of Thick-billed Kingbird come from south-central and southern Arizona, north to Pinal County (Monson and Phillips 1964). There are also winter vagrancy records from Baja California (Collins and Atwood 1991). Vagrant records north of normal range are not numerous, but include a sight record for Colorado in Jefferson County on 23 October 23, 1992 (Prather 1994a). In Nevada there are 2 accepted records by the Nevada Bird Records Committee with records coming from late October and November (Tinsman and Meyers 2016). There are also 2 recently photographed records for Nevada that are also from the months October and November that will likely be accepted by the Nevada Bird Records Committee after they are reviewed (NBRC 2017). In Utah there is 1 accepted photographed record of a Thick-billed Kingbird by the Utah Bird Records Committee from Upper Calf Canyon in Emery County on October 20, 2009 (Tripp *et al.* 2010).

Along the west coast north of California, there are no accepted records of the Thick-billed Kingbird in Oregon (OFO 2016), Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016) or in Idaho (IBRC 2017). The Thick-billed Kingbird is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with a well-documented bird found on Vancouver Island in the fall of 1974 (Crowell and Nehls 1975a, Dawe 1976a).

In eastern North America, there is only 1 record of an adult bird found and well photographed at Presqu'ile Provincial Park in southern Ontario on August 28, 2012 (Cranford 2013).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Thick-billed Kingbird is covered by all standard North American field guides. This species is a medium to large flycatcher measuring length 24 cm in length, with a wingspan of 40 cm, and weighing 56 grams (Sibley 2000). The Thick-billed Kingbird is a very distinct looking species and would not easily be confused with any regularly occurring Kingbird species in British Columbia. The Thick-billed Kingbird is the only large flycatcher with dark upperparts and mostly whitish underparts found in the southwestern United States and western Mexico, and is generally unmistakable within its normal range (Lowther *et al.* 2017). All other equally large flycatchers regularly occurring within same range including; Tropical, Cassin's, and Western Kingbirds, have strongly yellowish underparts and more olive upperparts

(Lowther *et al.* 2017). The Eastern Kingbird, which is a common breeding species in British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1997), but rarely may overlap Thick-billed Kingbird's range during migration, is slightly smaller with strongly contrasting blackish upperparts that are not grayish and white underparts, with a white tip on the tail (Lowther *et al.* 2017). In addition, Thick-billed Kingbird's bill is noticeably larger and stockier than those of any other North American flycatcher; the bill depth at the nostril is 9.3–11.0 mm for this species, but < 8.0 mm in all other species (Pyle 1997c). *Myiarchus* flycatchers in worn plumage may superficially resemble the Thick-billed Kingbird, but these species are all less stocky in build, and the bill is much less robust and triangular (Lowther *et al.* 2017) All *Myiarchus* flycatchers show rufous in wings and tail, and lack contrast between dark head and white throat (Lowther *et al.* 2017). It is also important to remember that any *Myiarchus* flycatcher in British Columbia is a vagrant species that requires documentation and careful scrutiny (Toochin and Fenneman 2014a).

The following description is taken from Lowther *et al.* (2017) unless otherwise stated.

In overall characteristics both sexes look similar to each other. Adult birds are dusky brown above, head slightly darker, crown with central yellow patch that is usually concealed. The bill is massive in size and is dark gray to black. The eyes are dark brown (Ridgway 1907). The underparts are whitish with pale gray on the breast and have a variable amount of pale yellow on the belly and undertail coverts. The legs and feet are dark gray to black. The tail is square shaped and dark brown (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Juvenile plumage is held from July to September (Sibley 2000) and is similar to adult birds, but lacks the yellow in the crown (Sibley 2000). The wing coverts and tail are edged with rufous, and the underparts are more strongly yellowish down to the vent (Sibley 2000).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Thick-billed Kingbird is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with a single photographed record of an immature male found by Mr. Brandon and subsequently seen by many observers at Qualicum Beach, on the east side of Vancouver Island from October 20–November 12, 1974 (Crowell and Nehls 1975a, Dawe 1976a). Unfortunately the bird was found dead from an apparent window strike on November 12, 1974 and the skin was put into the Royal British Columbia Museum as specimen number 14750 (Campbell *et al.* 1997). The British Columbia record fits perfectly with the pattern of vagrancy established in California where two-thirds of those states records have involved birds that turn up in October or November and spend the winter (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2017). The pattern of vagrancy along the west coast shown by the Thick-billed Kingbird is a pattern that is shared by other southern tyrannids (McCaskie *et al.* 1967, Roberson 1980). The limited range of the Thick-billed Kingbird both in North America and in Mexico is likely why this species doesn't wander north out of its normal

range very often (Howell and Webb 2010). The fact that it has in the past means that this species should be watched for in the fall in the future. The Thick-billed Kingbird has the potential to turn up anywhere in British Columbia.

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