

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

NOTES ON AN UNUSUALLY SITUATED SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHERS' (*TYRANNUS FORFICATUS*) NEST

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Imhof (1976) declared Scissor-tailed Flycatchers uncommon on the Alabama coast during migration, particularly in fall, but rare at any time inland. One of the earliest inland records was a specimen taken in Autauga County in the spring of 1889 or 1890 (Golson and Holt 1914). On the basis of several summer records of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Imhof (1976) stated "It is not known to nest in the state, but summer records indicate that nesting may eventually occur". The first occurrence came during the summer of 1990, when a pair of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers fledged four young, west of Florence (Lauderdale Co.), Al. (Jackson 1991). Since then, there have been nesting records from Florence, Decatur (Morgan Co.) and Birmingham (Jefferson Co.) (Jackson, pers. commun.), and an unconfirmed report from southern Montgomery County (Meadows, pers. commun.).

Before 1996, each of the nests in Alabama had been in a traditional site: five-thirty feet (1.5-9.1 m) high in a tree or, less commonly, on the ledge of a man-made structure (Harrison 1978 and Fitch 1980). In 1996, the pattern was broken.

On 19 June 1996, Phil Snow noted a male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher flying up from a fence that runs along Butler Mill Road in Snowden, Montgomery County, Alabama. He and Carolyn observed it again on 20 June.

That afternoon, we were attempting to spot it again, when I noticed a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) on the cross-bar of a high metal tower supporting high-tension wires. The tower was 130 feet (40 m) high and the cross-bar was 120 feet (37 m) above the ground (Gaines, pers. commun.). We saw a male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher diving at the heron repeatedly.

On 22 June, I set up a scope on the road approximately three hundred yards (273 m) NNE of the tower and examined the cross-bar. There were grasses and dry weeds hanging approximately one foot (0.3 m) down from a plate on the cross-bar. This suggested to us that there was a nest hidden from view. The male scissortail flew up to the site of the presumed nest and all but its tail disappeared from sight.

Over the next three weeks, the behavior of the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers served to confirm the location of the nest. The male scissortail engaged in an aggressive interaction with a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) several feet below the nest, while the female spent much time on the nest.

On 12 July, we knew that at least one egg had hatched when we noted both parents flying to the nest. We observed the female carrying an insect to the nest. Both birds continued bringing food to the nest through 24 July. On 24 July, we spotted the first fledged bird flying weakly at the base of the tower. By the next day, there were three fledglings all near the ground. Neither of us ever saw any of the fledglings return to the nest, although they

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were flying well enough to fly to telephone wires and tops of 30-foot (9.1 m) trees by 27 July.

The nest site offered perfect protection from snakes and mammalian predators, but it appeared vulnerable to other birds. Many birds used the tower. The scissortails seem to have tolerated Purple Martins (*Progne subis*), Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*), Northern Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*), European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) and Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*). The male drove off an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) when the young Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were still in the nest. It drove off a Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) and a Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) after the young had fledged. Although these scissortails nested unusually far east and unusually far from the ground, they were successful in their efforts.

LITERATURE CITED

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