

FORK-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*TYRANNUS SAVANA*)* SIGHTED AT FORT MORGAN

Bill Summerour

A vagrant Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) was observed by the author and three JSU ornithology students on 24 April 1988 in the open area immediately east of the museum on the Fort Morgan peninsula. The bird was presumably an immature since it lacked the long tail streamers, or a molting adult that had not yet completely replaced its outer tail feathers.

We first spotted the bird perched on top of a metal stake, possibly a water spigot, about a foot (30 cm) above the ground in an open area just east of the Fort. It was facing away from us, providing good views of its head, back, and tail with the lawn as a backdrop. The first impression experienced by all four observers was of a darkish bird with a black cap, pale gray back, and disproportionately long tail. It remained on the spigot for about a minute while we studied it, moving its head from side to side and occasionally fanning its tail as it balanced against the wind.

About the time we realized the bird was a Fork-tailed Flycatcher, it flew from the spigot and headed east with the wind, passing within 60 feet (18 meters) of us to our left, or south, putting the sun to our back and giving us good lighting on the white underside and dark head, upper wings and tail. The long tail was particularly noticeable in flight, somewhat like a Scissor-tailed's, but not as long.

We watched through our binoculars as it flew across the opening east of the fort and settled on a telephone line. I ran to close the distance and get a better look, stopping about 40 feet (12 meters) short of the bird so as not to risk frightening it away before I had a chance to see it again. This time it was facing me on the wire and although the details described earlier were not as apparent at this distance, the black crown, completely white underside and long tail were plainly visible. Before I could approach any closer, the bird flew from the wire and disappeared behind a building and never reappeared. In spite of an hour-long effort to relocate it, we were unable to do so.

All four observers concurred independently on the following characteristics: medium black bill and **completely black crown** and sides of head contrasting with a white throat and gray nape giving the head a black-capped appearance; a **light gray mantle** contrasting with

*Formerly *Muscicarpa tyrannus* Linnaeus

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

the black wings, tail and crown; tail long, black, and deeply forked (but not scissor-tailed) with distinct white outer edges which were particularly conspicuous when the tail was spread; and white underside seen when the bird was perched, flying, and on the telephone wire.

Unusual sightings are justifiably subject to much scrutiny and skepticism, especially in the absence of a specimen or photograph. In this case the most obvious question will be, "Was it not a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher?" The black crown alone would eliminate this possibility. As Bond (1971) points out, "in individuals lacking streamers, the black crown and sides of head in contrast with the pale gray back and white underparts...are diagnostic." Could it have been a Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*)? The small to medium bill would rule out this possibility and so also would the black crown and disproportionately long tail. The Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) has a black head and white underparts but any further similarity stops here, since the Eastern's tail is not forked and has a conspicuous white terminal band. The Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) has white outer tail feathers but has a pale head and is washed or tinged with yellow on the abdomen. Nor could any of the other western kingbirds be confused with a Fork-tailed. Here again the black crown, gray back, and long, forked tail would rule out any of these possibilities.

The Fork-tailed Flycatcher is a common bird in Central and South America and I have seen the bird in Panama, Costa Rica and Venezuela, although I do not recall ever having seen an individual lacking the long streamers.

A good illustration of an immature Fork-tailed Flycatcher which is very similar to the bird we saw, is shown in *Peterson's 1973 Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. The bird we saw, however, had a much longer and more deeply forked tail. Otherwise the illustration gives a good idea of what the bird looked like.

Although the Fork-tailed Flycatcher has never been seen before in Alabama, the latest edition (1983) of the *AOU Checklist of North American Birds* list the species as "casual north in eastern North America to southern Canada, primarily along the Atlantic coast (recorded Wisconsin, Michigan, southern Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, New England, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, South Carolina, Florida and Mississippi)." Lane (1984) states that there are five records for Florida.

The addition of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher to the state list will depend

on the acceptance of this record by the Bird Records Committee. Since the bird was seen by only one experienced observer, the species must be added as "hypothetical" until other sightings, a photograph, or specimen is available to further substantiate the occurrence of the species in Alabama.

Literature Cited

American Ornithologists Union. 1983. *Checklist of North American Birds*, 6th ed. Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas.

Bond, James. 1971. *Birds of the West Indies*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Lane, James A. 1984. *A Birder's Guide to Florida*. L and P Press, Denver, Colorado.

Peterson, Roger T. 1973. *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

