

**Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondii*)
on Long Island, 27-28 Oct 2001
New York State's First Record**

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Abstract

A bird identified as New York State's first recorded Hammond's Flycatcher was seen by many observers at the West End of Jones Beach State Park, Nassau County, on 27-28 Oct 2001. It was studied and photographed, and was finally captured by a Merlin. We describe its diagnostic features, and note that New York birders might do well to look for other western species of *Empidonax*, especially during fall migration.

A Fine Day at the Beach

During the fall migration, many birders monitor weather maps and forecasts as they look forward to the arrival of cold fronts that bring with them waves of migrants. The projected arrival of a strong cold front from the west on Thursday night, 26 Oct 2001, after several days of southerly winds, held promise of a good flight. The authors spoke that evening, to establish that we would independently work the barrier islands along the South Shore of Long Island the next morning, and keep in contact by cellular telephone. These islands – Fire Island and Jones Island to its west – concentrate migrants that move west-southwestward along the ocean front, and offer the most exciting birding on Long Island during autumn.

As predicted, the front materialized, and a cold, strong west wind on the morning of 26 Oct was the THE SEASON'S FIRST convincing augury of approaching winter. Futuyma began his day at the western end of Fire Island, while John and Gerta Fritz drove directly to the West End of Jones Beach State Park, where the last healthy stands of Japanese black pine remain and act as a haven for tired passerines on their westward flight. Unfortunately, the pines all along the length of Jones Island have been devastated by nematode-bearing sawyer beetles and fungus-bearing turpentine beetles, except for the extreme west end.

We were not disappointed. In both areas, throngs of Golden-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers, White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and other late fall migrants were to be seen, while flocks of American Robins and blackbirds, a few Pine Siskins and American Pipits, and even a late Bobolink passed overhead.

Shortly after 0900 hours, as he worked the westernmost pine grove, Fritz became aware of a raucous flock of American Crows, which had already drawn Al Wollin's attention to a large female Barn Owl. Fritz called Futuyma to

announce this happy find. Futuyma was on the point of leaving Fire Island for Jones Beach, and so drove all the more urgently to the West End.

By the time Futuyma arrived (09:25), Fritz had noticed an *Empidonax* flycatcher along the eastern side of the westernmost pine stand, in the lee of the wind. The bird favored a small clearing between the shrubs, that caught the sun's rays and evidently was warm enough for midges or other small insects to be active near the ground. The flycatcher foraged near the ground, usually less than a meter high. From a distance of about 8 to 15 meters, its most immediately apparent features were the small size, a strikingly long primary projection, a strong green cast on the crown and back, a plain, almost blue-gray face, and a bold whitish eye-ring that was widest behind the eye. We rapidly agreed that it was almost certainly a western vagrant. Although we had both seen all the species of *Empidonax* north of Mexico, we had not studied them with an eye to identifying silent individuals out of range, and it was clear that we needed to consult field guides.

Identification

After about five minutes of carefully registering as many of the bird's features as possible lest it decamp, Futuyma retrieved the Sibley (2000) and National Geographic Society (1999) guides from his car. As he thumbed through Sibley while returning to the observation site, he noticed that Sibley marks the gray face as a distinctive feature of Hammond's Flycatcher – which quickly became the leading hypothesis on the bird's identity. For the next 40 minutes or so, we worked together on the identification, with Fritz maintaining a vertical posture so as to mark the bird's dorsal features, and Futuyma lying prone in an almost hopeless effort to see the ventral side of the lower mandible. We noted the points mentioned above, as well as the whitish gray throat, an olive wash across the gray breast and down the flanks, the yellow wash on the lower belly in contrast to the utter lack of yellow on throat or breast, the broad, buffy wingbars, the pale but not very strongly contrasting edges of the tertials, the rather short, slightly notched tail, the fresh plumage and lack of wear. The bill was rather small, and when seen several times in dorsal aspect appeared narrow and triangular, lacking the strongly convex sides of broad-billed species such as Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. We desperately looked for the dusky color that that according to our field guides characterizes the distal half of the lower mandible of Hammond's Flycatcher, but the bird stayed so low that even from his inferior position, Futuyma could not be sure that the cantaloupe-orange color of the base of the mandible did not extend throughout. Both we and Al Wollin and Manny Levine who had joined us, remarked on the bird's behavior. While it frequently flicked its tail upward as do many *Empidonax* species, this action was accompanied by a kinglet-like flick of the wings that none of us could recall seeing so prominently in any eastern *Empidonax*. Also present were Pat Jones and Sam Jannazzo, the latter taking photographs which he generously provided for our use in submitting a report to NYSARC.

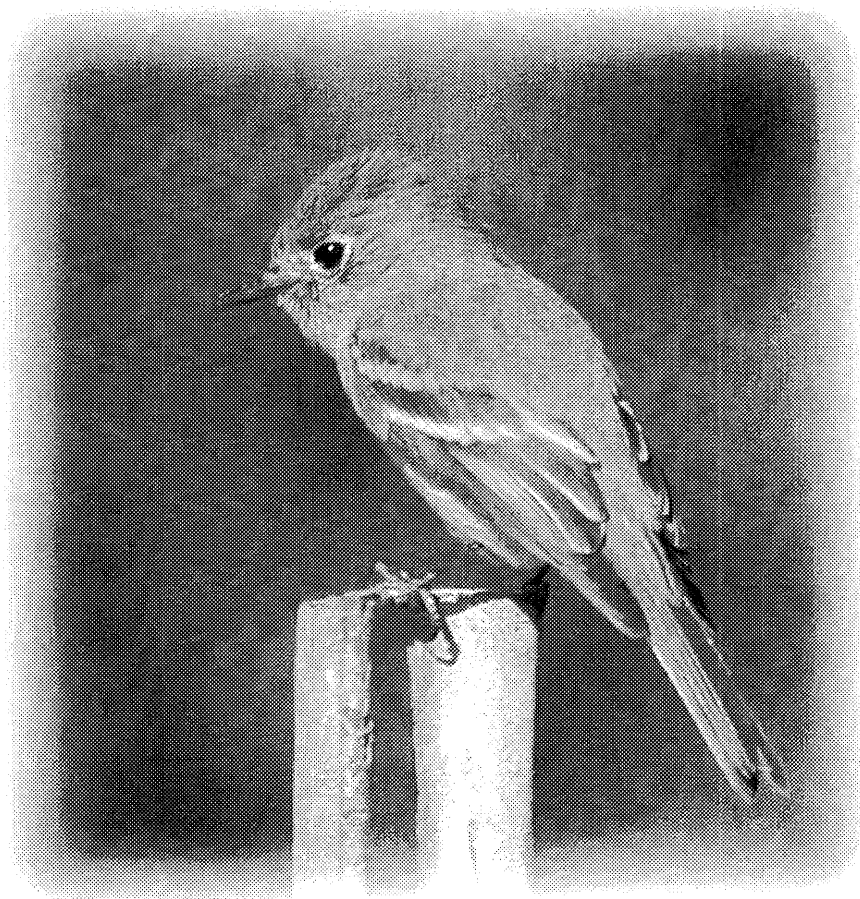
We concluded, before leaving the bird at about 10:45, that all *Empidonax* species north of Mexico, except for *E. hammondi*, could be eliminated. The size, shape, color, and strong eye-ring were wrong for Alder or Willow. The shape of the eye-ring and bill and the gray face eliminated Acadian. The shape of the bill and the utter lack of yellow on throat or breast were wrong for Yellow-bellied or "Western" (i.e., Cordilleran and Pacific-slope). For many reasons, it was quite obviously not a Buff-breasted or Gray Flycatcher. Dusky Flycatcher, the species that is famously similar to Hammond's, has a short primary projection and moults on the wintering ground – and so would show worn plumage at this season. The greatest risk of confusion (as several friends remarked the next day) might well be with Least Flycatcher, but this species should show a shorter primary projection, more strongly contrasting pale edges of the tertials and secondaries, and more convex sides of the bill, and also moults after migration on its wintering grounds. According to our field guides, the points favoring Hammond's Flycatcher included the small, almost straight-sided bill, the gray face, the shape of the eye-ring, the olive wash on breast and flanks, the very long primary projection, the fresh plumage, and the frequent wing-flicking behavior. We were uncomfortable on only one point. We had not definitively seen a dusky tip to the lower mandible.

Before leaving, we called friends who we thought might be free to look for the bird later that day, and succeeded in leaving a message for Shaibal Mitra.

Later Observations

At about 14:30 that afternoon, Mitra called Futuyma to report that he was watching the flycatcher in the same location that it had occupied that morning. Familiar with fine points of *Empidonax* identification by virtue of extensive mistnetting and banding experience, Mitra concurred with our identification, and expressed little concern about the color of the lower mandible, which he felt could vary with age. Indeed, Pyle et al. (1987, 1997) note that in hatching year Hammond's Flycatchers, the dark pigmentation of the mandible may not develop until November or later.

The next morning (Saturday, 27 Oct), flocks of birders found the flycatcher obligingly present at the same site. Perhaps because the wind was weaker than on the previous day, it foraged more widely and at greater height (up to about two meters from the ground). In mid-morning, disturbed by a passerby, it flew about 150 meters eastward, and settled along the south-facing border of a row of pines, where it remained. At least 40 birders had the opportunity to study it at length through spotting scopes. Some were certain that the bird did have dark pigmentation toward the tip of the lower mandible, forming a narrow medial spot that was difficult to see in lateral view. Birders' confidence that it was Hammond's ranged from substantial to complete. By early afternoon, only a few birders remained. At about 1400, they were the last to see New York's first apparent Hammond's Flycatcher, as a Merlin stooped and carried it off.



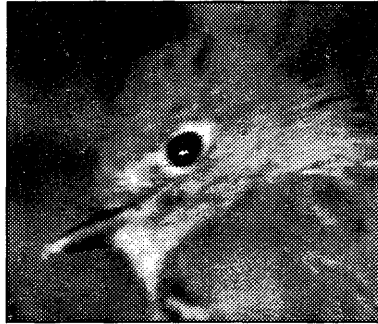
Hammond's Flycatcher
27 Oct 2001 Jones Beach, Nassau County
Angus Wilson

Reflections

By the following day, Angus Wilson had posted photos on his web site that he and Andrew Guthrie had taken with digital cameras through their telescopes. Soon thereafter, a number of experienced birders in western states sent Wilson their reactions. "I agree wholeheartedly that the beast is HAFL...Least (most importantly) and Dusky are readily eliminated – by primary projection alone, if need be – and there are really no other considerations to be made" (Tony Leukering). "It's Hammond's Flycatcher ... The primary projection is half again longer than Dusky or Least" (Will Russell). "That bird...is a 100% classic Hammond's Flycatcher...with a noticeable (let's call it huge) gap between P7 and P6. Most of the shorter-winged empids have much more evenly spaced primaries" (Alvaro Jaramillo).

This bird appeared earlier in the season than the other Hammond's Flycatchers that, to our knowledge, have been recorded in the Northeast. A specimen was collected in Lehigh Co., PA on 23 Dec 1966 (D. S. Heinzelman 1968, *Auk* 86:582; *Field Notes* 38(3)), one lingered in Bethlehem, PA from 18 Nov to 22 Dec 2000 (*North American Birds* 55 (2)), and one was recorded from 24 Nov to 6 Dec 1995 in Barrington, RI (*Field Notes* 50(1-2)). Three other western species of *Empidonax* have been recorded in the Northeast. A "Western" Flycatcher was documented on Fire Island, NY 14-16 Sep 1995 (*Field Notes* 50 (1)), and Pacific-slope Flycatchers have been confirmed twice in S. Lancaster Co., PA (15-26 Dec 1990 and 15-16 Dec 1991: 45 (2), 46 (2)) and once in Chatham, NC (15-21 Jan 2000: 54 (2)). A Gray Flycatcher was at Cape Henlopen, DE from 16 Nov through Dec of 1991 (46 (2)), and a Dusky Flycatcher has been recorded in Nova Scotia, 24 Nov to 27 Dec 1996 (50 (1-2), 51 (1)). (All citations are of volume (number) of *Audubon Field Notes/North American Birds*.)

Given these precedents, New York birders would do well to scrutinize fall empids carefully, especially those that lag behind the usual migration schedule. Birders were once taught that identification of nonsinging empids is almost hopeless. For example, Pough (1946) wrote that "during migration it is generally impossible to identify any of the *Empidonax* flycatchers in the field unless the bird gives its distinctive call," and Peterson (1961) advised that "the wise field man [*sic*] usually lets most of them go as just *Empidonaxes*." Many younger birders know, and some older birders have learned (on 26 Oct 2001, if not earlier), that this need not be so. Certainly the difficulty of identification of many of these birds must not be underestimated; but the discovery of diagnostic features has made field identification of these species a challenge rather than the hopeless cause it once seemed to be.



Hammond's Flycatcher 27 Oct 2001
Jones Beach, Nassau County
Andrew Guthrie

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