

One That Got Away: A Possible Nesting of Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) in Region 1

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For every story our fishing friends have about the great fish that got away, we birders have at least one about the great bird that did the same. Field work on the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 Project yields many tales of that kind, and my latest one comes from a morning of work in Block 1370C, southeast of the village of Brocton in Chautauqua County. In this case, I hooked and landed the bird, but the nesting record toyed with my lure, teased me, and swam away.

The catch: Saturday 28 Jun 2003 was a lovely morning in our part of the state. With the car windows down, I was enjoying the sunshine, the breeze, and the smell of freshly cut hay along a dirt road separating a hayfield from a vineyard. About a hundred feet ahead of me, the road sloped down to the Brocton Reservoir. In the field to my right, territorial male Bobolinks chased each other over the timothy in a swirl of black, white, and buff, singing their syncopated, banjo-like songs. In the Atlas codes, that was *PR-T* (*Probable breeding—bird holding territory*) for Bobolink. Nearby, two Savannah Sparrows sang against each other from the tops of rolled hay bales. That was territorial singing, and another *Pr-T* went into the Atlas Field Card. On a power line above the vineyard, a pair of Eastern Kingbirds perched close together and preened: *PR-P* (*Pair in suitable nesting habitat*) for the kingbirds. The day's field work was off to a promising start, but things were about to get still better.

Cresting the hill in front of me, a large flycatcher flew slowly up the road toward the car, hovering now and then as it hawked insects over the hay. Like an Eastern Kingbird in size and shape, it had the barrel-chested, blunt-headed, big-billed look of the genus *Tyrannus*. On this bird, though, the head, nape, and breast were a lovely, pale ash-gray, contrasting sharply with bright, rich lemon-yellow on the rest of the under parts. As the bird passed within fifteen or twenty feet of the car, it was easy to see a dark, square tail. Black both above and below, the tail showed no terminal band. On each outermost rectrix, white edging was narrow but distinct. My pulse quickened as I asked myself, "Western Kingbird? Here? In late June?"

Tame and confiding, the bird soon perched on the electric wire across the road. After a quick look at *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, I stood on the road, checking off field marks through the binoculars: Gray mantle? Yes. Unbarred, brownish-gray wings? Yes. Whitish chin and malar stripe? Yes. And then the clincher: an eye line—black and distinct on the lores, grayer and more diffuse on the ear coverts—gave the bird a "masked" look at close range. I dashed to the car, dialed Dick Miga's number on the cell phone, and said something calm and collected like "Dick! Western Kingbird! How fast can you get here?" As obliging as the kingbird itself, the Federation's Vice-President was there in minutes, and at once

he confirmed the identification. For a happy quarter of an hour we stood and admired this handsome stray from the west.

The one that got away: That afternoon, things began to get more complicated. For starters, several birders tried to see the Western Kingbird without success. In fact, Dick Miga and I proved to be the last people to see it. Suddenly, I was doubly grateful that Dick had reached the site before the bird made its exit.

One of the disappointed birders, my friend and fellow Lake Erie Bird Club member Joe Gula, stopped by that afternoon with a piece of news I'd never expected. Mr. Greg Borst, who works at the Brocton Reservoir and travels the road to it nearly every day, had driven up and introduced himself as Joe waited for the bird. Roughly the following conversation took place:

Mr. Borst: Hi! What are you looking for?

Joe Gula: A Western Kingbird.

Mr. Borst: Is that the one with the yellow breast?

Joe: That's the one. Have you seen it?

Mr. Borst: Sure. It sits on the wires here all the time. That bird nested down the road near the reservoir, and my wife and I watched it on the nest.

The plot was thickening: four hundred miles east of its normal breeding range, had the Western Kingbird actually bred? If so, had it paired with an Eastern Kingbird at the reservoir? And, if the bird *had* nested, had it fledged young? These were a few of the questions I hoped to answer. Pursuing them proved exciting, frustrating, and fun.

A few days later, I arranged to meet Greg Borst and his wife Lynette at the Brocton Reservoir. It was chiefly Mrs. Borst, I learned, who had closely followed the possible kingbird nesting on the reservoir grounds, visiting the nest site several times. When I asked to see the nest, Mrs. Borst led me down a broad, sloping lawn bordered by a second-growth woods of mature Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), and a few other trees. Undergrowth bordering the lawn included tangles of Highbush Blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*) and shrubs of Tartarian Honeysuckle (*Lonicera tartarica*). About five feet above the ground in the forking branches of a honeysuckle shrub was the nest. But this was no kingbird's nest. Built of grasses and weed stalks worked into a thick wall of mud, it was clearly the familiar nest of an American Robin! I put the question to Mrs. Borst directly. Could the nesting bird she observed have been a robin? Graciously, she assured me it could not. Although she was not a birder, Mrs. Borst was a close and careful observer of nature. Like her husband, she had known robins well for many years, and the bird on this nest drew her attention because she had never seen one like it. It had, she emphasized, a gray head and bright yellow breast, and it was the

same bird that often perched on the wires along the reservoir road, where Dick Miga and I saw it on 28 Jun. Looking at the Western Kingbird in my *Sibley Guide to Birds*, she at once said, "That's the one."

Unaware of how unusual this nesting was, Mrs. Borst had taken no photographs and had not recorded the dates or details of her observations. To the best of her recollection, she had first seen the possible Western Kingbird on the robin's nest near the end of May. Her last observation came around 20 Jun, roughly a week before Dick Miga and I saw the bird. Early in the nesting cycle, she had seen at least three eggs in the nest. Quite different from the unmarked, "robin's-egg blue" eggs of *Turdus migratorius*, these eggs were buff-colored with splotches of brown. Later, the adult bird had fed three nestlings, which became fully feathered and grew large enough to fledge (or nearly so) as Mrs. Borst continued to visit the nest site. She had not seen the young fledge, however, nor had she observed the adult bird with fledged young. Around 20 Jun, she had simply found the nest empty and no adults or young at the nest site. About the bird's mate, she had no information. Neither she nor her husband had seen it associating with an Eastern Kingbird, or with any other species.

What a teasing, tantalizing set of second-hand data! Among my many questions about this enigmatic nesting, the first involved the bird's use of an American Robin's nest. Was this even possible? Are Western Kingbirds, like the cuckoos, ever known to use the nests of other species? In fact, they are. According to Kenn Kaufman (1996), *Tyrannus verticalis* sometimes nests "in abandoned nests of other birds." And Arthur Cleveland Bent (1963) cites one pair's use of "an old nest of Bullock's Oriole."

Still, the skeptic in me rushed in with objections, ticking off a seemingly endless series of *no's*. There were no photos of the nesting bird, the eggs, or the nestlings. No written field notes. No exact egg dates. No observation of fledging, and no fledged young seen in the nest area. No young accompanied the adult Western Kingbird when Dick Miga and I saw it on 28 Jun. No report on the nesting from experienced birders. And finally, no observation of this bird paired with an Eastern Kingbird, making the bird's mate a hypothetical matter. In short, far too many *no's*, and far too little objective evidence. End of discussion, then?

Not quite. Skepticism and objectivity aren't always identical, and I kept returning to this unanswered question: If a Western Kingbird did *not* incubate eggs and feed nestlings in the American Robin's nest, what gray-headed, yellow-breasted bird, given to using the nests of other species, did? I had no candidate to suggest. And then there was Mrs. Borst's description of the eggs, which agreed well with written descriptions of Western Kingbird eggs (Bent 1963, Harrison 1975, Terres 1980).

What do all the facts and all the questions add up to? Did a Western Kingbird nest near the Brocton Reservoir in the spring of 2003? I believe it did. Like many a brook or brown trout, though, did any acceptable *record* of this nesting get away? Sadly, I think it did. Much as I'd love to enter "Western Kingbird" with an Atlas code of *CO-NY (Confirmed breeding—nest with young)* on a Notable Species Form for Block 1370C, I can't reasonably do it. Like it or not, in an effort of amateur and professional science like the Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 Project, only traditional, agreed-upon, and objective forms of

documentation will do. Lacking photos, detailed field notes, or at least a first-hand observation by someone familiar with Western Kingbirds, there's simply no breeding record to enter. Perhaps, though, experiences like this one yield better things than records. Forced at last to say "I believe, but strictly speaking I do not know," we submit to the same mystery that has humbled students of nature—amateur and professional alike—from Gilbert White to Henry David Thoreau to Rachel Carson. We acknowledge that far more is happening out there than we can ever see, record, or fully understand. In their wake, the records that get away leave behind their share of frustration. But, like an unhooked trout, they leave humility and wonder as well. And, if humility and wonder are secondary benefits of an undertaking like the Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 Project, they may be just as important as anything else it teaches.

Literature Cited

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