

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

East Meets West: a Hybrid Eastern x Western Kingbird on Long Island

It was an excellent spring birding day on May 16th, 2014 in the old farm fields of Hallockville Museum Farm and the new Hallock State Park just beyond those fields (Riverhead, N.Y.). The walk I was leading for 30+ bird enthusiasts was beginning to wind down. Some people were already going ahead to their cars when I spied an interesting bird perched on an old dried mullein stalk in a fallow field. The colors on the bird were striking and it was hard to believe we could have missed it if it had been there earlier in the day when we passed this exact spot. It was the shape and size of an Eastern Kingbird, two of which were perched nearby, hawking insects from their own dried mullein stalks. Those birds were quite vocal and we had seen them earlier in the day in the same spot.

The unknown bird was without doubt a kingbird or other flycatcher species. My first thought was Great-crested Flycatcher, which nests in the area every year. However, it didn't have the reddish brown tail of the Great-crested. Our bird also had a very light colored throat; Great-crested Flycatchers sport a darker gray throat. My second thought was, could it be an Ash-throated Flycatcher? I had seen this species before on Long Island in, of all places, my own backyard. But the bird we were looking at had a slightly darker yellow belly, not the paler yellow that Ash-throats exhibit. Again, there was no reddish brown color in the tail or on the outer wings, so it wasn't this species either. When the bird started to hawk insects we all could easily see it had no white outer tail feathers, thereby ruling out Western Kingbird, which some of us were thinking it might be. It did however have a creamy-whitish tipped tail, and it chased the Eastern Kingbirds nearby. Now completely confused, I really had no idea what it was.

The bird had a gray-colored head with a light throat, gray across the upper breast, then bright yellow extending down to its undertail. The bill was dark-colored. The back of the bird was darker gray as was the upper tail, which had that whitish tip. My old field guide that I carry didn't have Cassin's Kingbird (that's how old it is) but other folks had newer books with them. Looking at the field guides, we all decided it must be a Cassin's and when someone googled it on their fancy phone the description said Cassin's can have a whitish tip, not always cream-colored. With this information, we all decided that's what it was and calls went out almost instantly about the sighting.

Realizing that a bird this rare would need good write-ups, I asked the observers to write descriptions of all this to back me up. Many people agreed, and they did so within a day or two. One member of our group, Steve Lacker, took a good photograph of it (p. 331). Based on that photograph and our descriptions it was decided by the best birding experts in the State that the bird was a rare hybrid of an Eastern and Western Kingbird, and not a Cassin's! All I

can say is none of our books showed that hybrid, but the combination has been known to occur in nature. A form describing the sighting and a photograph were submitted to the New York State Avian Records Committee for review also.

The bird did not stay in the area for any length of time. By that afternoon it couldn't be found. People looked for it for days afterward to no avail. How fortunate we all were to have seen this good looking but confusing bird at that one point in time!

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This apparent Eastern Kingbird x Western Kingbird hybrid was an exceptionally intriguing find at Northville, *Suffolk*, 16 May 2014, © Steve Lacker. See note pp. 304-305 this issue.