FIRST DOCUMENTED OCCURRENCE OF HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER *(EMPIDONAX HAMMONDII)* IN ALABAMA

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Figure 1. Hammond's Flycatcher banded at Fort Morgan. (Photo by Martha B. Sargent)

The Study of *Empidonax* Flycatchers in Alabama has been difficult and incomplete. One reason for this is that all members of the genus are very similar in appearance and are notoriously difficult to identify in the field. To add to the problem, only one, the Acadian *(Empidonax virescens)*, breeds in the state. All of the other five species of empids known to occur in Alabama are transients and are usually silent as they pass through on migration. Identification by voice is therefore next to impossible.

In the summer of 1992, with my banding associate Martha B. Sargent, an effort was undetaken to determine the ideal time to locate and identify empids at our bird banding station located at Fort Morgan on the Alabama Gulf Coast. Our own banding records and conversations with veteran bird bander Thomas A. Imhof indicated that the fall migration should be a good time for this study. Additional conversations with Greg D. Jackson, seasons editor for *American Birds* and *Alabama Birdlife,* plus access to his extensive records, revealed that September should yield an excellent sampling of empids in Alabama.

We had long suspected that some western empids were rare but regular fall

migrants in Alabama, but occasional netted specimens yielded only Acadian, Least *(E. minimus),* Yellow-bellied *(E. flaviventris)*, Willow *(E. traillii)*, and Alder *(E. alnorum).* In addition, many netted birds were released unbanded and unidentified. With the exception of the Acadian, which molts after breeding and before departing North America, all other adult empids in eastern North America are in badly worn plumage during migration with few if any identifying features.

Recent publications such as Kaufman's *Advanced Birding,* Pyles's, et. al. *Identification Guide To North American Passerines and* The *North American Bird Bander,* Volume XIII, No. 3, have made the work of bird banders much easier and less frustrating. In particular, the wing formulas now available, when used with other keys, have allowed banders to identify over 90% of all empids captured. The field work of many researchers and the study of specimen skins has been combined in the above works. Armed with this knowledge at our fingertips, the identification of empids has become a routine part of current banding operations.

As predicted by Jackson and Imhof, mid-September netting efforts resulted in the capture, identification, and banding of many empids of several species, including Yellow-bellied, Least, Acadian , Alder, Willow and a few that could not be positively identified. These unidentified empids were released unbanded.

The rapid pace of banding on 19 September 1992 was routine"first in-first out" with no special attention given to flycatchers until they were being examined prior to actual banding. The normal procedure was to age and sex the birds first. As we removed a somewhat grayish empid from one of the holding bags, we noticed that it was very small and appeared big-headed and short-tailed. An examination revealed that the skull was completely ossified, indicating and adult. In addition, the bird was in fresh plumage with no signs of wear. Since the only adult eastern empid that molts before migrating in autumn is the Acadian, it was immediately apparent that this was an *Empidonax* we had not banded before.

The following measurements were then taken: wing 70mm; tail 57mm; exposed culmen 9mm; width inside nostrils 3.03mm; width of culmen at basal end of nostril 6.11mm; width at distal end of nostril 3.66mm. A series of measurements of the primaries revealed p-10 longer than p-5 by 3.2mm, but shorter than p-6 by 4.5mm. P-6 was emarginate, and p-9 was longer than p-5 by 7.1mm. These measurements, when applied to the wing formulas in our keys, suggested Hammond's Flycatcher *(E. hammondii).* Another in-hand observation noted was the fresh olive-gray head and back that was bright and showy. The head appeared slightly darker than the back. The tail appeared short and was sharply forked with the outer rectrices having prominent gray outer webs that showed no wear. The bill was *very short and narrow with straight sides.* The upper mandible was black but the lower mandible dark orangish on the basal one half grading into black on the distal half. The chin was whitish and the throat whitish-gray. The facial area was gray contrasting with the darker crown. The breast was dark olive-gray, and the belly and crissum light gray washed with yellow. The breast had a dark vested look with the vest almost

closed near the throat. The wings were paler when compared with those of an Alder flycatcher which we had also netted, and the whitish wing bars did not contrast with the wings as much as they did in the Alder. The wing extension was long and when folded made the tail appear short. The flanks and sides were dark olive-gray with a pale yellow wash. The feet and legs were black. The eye ring was prominent and whitish and fuller behind the eye.

At this stage it became a process of elimination. Feature number one was an adult empid in *freshly molted fall plumage*. Of the eastern empids, only the Acadian was a possibility. Of the western empids, only adult Hammond's and Buff-breasted *(E. fulvifrons)* undergo a complete molt before migrating. The Buff-breasted, and Acadian could be eliminated by plumage alone, leaving only the Hammond's as a real option.

Feature number two was the *small, short, narrow bill with straight sides.* Although the Least has a small bill, it is convex in shape and the lower mandible is uniformly orange-yellow. Our unidentified empid had the basal one-half dark orangish with the distal one-half dusky black, with the dusky color extending posteriorly along the cutting edges, or tomia, back toward the base of the lower mandible. Although the Least is also large-headed in appearance, nothing else indicated this species. The bill size, shape and color clearly indicated Hammond's.

Our identification of Alabama's first Hammond's Flycatcher (Figure 1) was supported not only by extensive notes made while the bird was in hand, but also by many in-hand photographs of individual field marks and features exclusive to Hammond's. In addition, these photos included side by side comparison with an Alder flycatcher that had been netted at the same time.

The process of studying *Empidonax* flycatchers in Alabama is only in its early stages. More information will be gathered and in all probability additional species will be identified in the future. Unfortunately, field identification of non-vocal *Empidonax* has remained at about the same confidence level, near zero. **Robert R. Sargent and Martha B. Sargent**, 7570 Mac Hicks Road, Trussville, AL 35173.