

INCREASED ABUNDANCE OF THE TROPICAL/COUCH'S KINGBIRD (*TYRANNUS*) COMPLEX IN ALABAMA AND THE WESTERN PANHANDLE OF FLORIDA

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The AOU Checklist of 1983, based on Traylor's studies (Traylor 1979), split the Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) into two separate species, Tropical Kingbird and Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*), thus creating almost insurmountable identification problems for field observers. The two species are virtually identical and are separable only by call. Of about 40 reports of this complex in Florida and Alabama, only 11 were calling birds, or about one in four.

Couch's Kingbird ranges north to southern Texas and south to northern Guatemala from the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre Oriental to sea level, where it is a common to fairly common resident. On the Yucatan Peninsula it is common in scrubby woodland of the interior and uncommon in arid beach scrub. It is partly migratory with partial withdrawal from the northern part of its range in winter (Howell & Webb 1995).

The Tropical Kingbird is much more widespread in its distribution, ranging from both slopes of Mexico's Sierras, from Sonora and central Tamaulipas south to Peru and central Argentina. Like the Couch's, it is common to fairly common, found in open and semi-open areas with scattered trees, hedges, and forest clearings. In Yucatan, it is common in arid beach scrub and uncommon in the scrubby woodland interior. It also is partly migratory in northern Mexico (Howell & Webb 1995) and its southern population is migratory to Amazonia in the austral winter. To anyone who has birded the Neotropics, both species appear ubiquitous in the proper habitat. Both prefer open or semi-open areas with trees, residential areas, clearings in forests, river edges and agricultural areas (Howell & Webb 1995, Hilty & Brown 1986). They are common from sea level to 1000 m., less common up to 2500 m. (Ridgely & Tudor 1994).

Both species are migratory, but the Tropical is more so than Couch's. In Colombia, the local population of the Tropical Kingbird is greatly augmented by an influx of migrants from the southern portion of its breeding range in the austral winter, May through September (Hilty & Brown 1986). In Ecuador, populations of local birds are also augmented by an influx of winter visitors in April and May in the lowlands (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001). Ridgely and Tudor (1994) consider breeders in northern Middle America possibly migratory.

Florida had about 25 reports of this complex as of 1992 (Robertson & Woolfenden 1992). Since that time there have been about 12 additional reports, seven of which have been in the Western Panhandle (Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa counties). Six of these seven reports have been from Gulf Breeze where the author and others have observed birds at close range, always perched in the same dead tree. The Gulf Breeze sightings range from May to July. Only two of these were calling, a 7 July 98 bird seen and heard by multiple observers and identified as a Couch's Kingbird. The other observed on 16 May 00 was videotaped and heard calling. It was identified as a Tropical Kingbird (accepted by FOSRC 00-425). There are three other accepted records of Tropical Kingbird for Florida. Three reports of calling birds identified as Couch's were relegated to Appendix A (unverified stragglers) in Robertson and Woolfenden (1992).

In Alabama, there are five reports of this complex (Steve McConnell pers. comm.). The first was a bird seen by Fairly Chandler in Magnolia Springs, Baldwin Co. 20 October 69 (Imhof 1976). The second report was a silent bird seen by the author and Mary Floyd at Ft. Morgan on 27 September 87. A bird seen by many observers along the Ft. Morgan road, Baldwin Co., on 4 October 88 was identified as a Couch's based on the vocalization heard by James Pfeiffer. The fourth was a silent bird identified by S. W. McConnell, 22 May 98 at the Battleship Park, Mobile Co. The latest was a silent bird found by Phil Tetlow and seen by multiple observers at Dauphin I., Mobile Co., on 22 September 01.

The frequency of sightings of this complex in Florida and Alabama has escalated since 1980, exceeding all prior reports. There have been six observations in just the first two years of this century. Although Florida's first report was in 1942 (Stevenson & Anderson 1994), most of the observations have occurred since 1980 and most are from migrant traps frequently covered by observers since the 1970's. The author has covered the area in Gulf Breeze, where six sightings have occurred, for over 30 years, yet all six occurrences have been since 1998. It is highly unlikely this conspicuous flycatcher could have been overlooked in previous years either at Gulf Breeze or other migrant traps where they are now found. A summary of sightings in Alabama and the Western Panhandle is contained in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Reports of the Tropical /Couch's (*Tyrannus*) Kingbird complex in Alabama and the Western Panhandle of Florida.

Date	Location	Species
20 Oct 1969	Magnolia Springs, Baldwin Co., AL	Tropical/Couch's
7 Sept 1975	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
27 Sept 1987	Ft. Morgan, Baldwin Co., AL	Tropical/Couch's
4 Oct 1988	Ft. Morgan, Baldwin Co., AL	Couch's
9 May 1992	Ft. Walton Beach, Okaloosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
22 May 1998	Battleship Park, Mobile Co., AL	Tropical/Couch's
7 July 1998	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Couch's
14 July 1998	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
14 June 1999	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
16 May 2000	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical
8 May 2001	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
25 June 2001	Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa Co., FL	Tropical/Couch's
22 Sept 2001	Dauphin Island, Mobile Co., AL	Tropical/Couch's

Because Couch's Kingbird is considered partially migratory and the Tropical Kingbird's southern population is a regular migrant, it is not surprising that extralimital records occur. There are records of the complex from as far north as Massachusetts and Nova Scotia (AOU 1983). The Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*), a congener with a similar distribution pattern, is an austral migrant that frequently overshoots its normal range in migration. There are about ten records of this species for Florida alone, April to July and September to November (Robertson & Woolfenden 1992).

In Alabama and the Western Panhandle, the Tropical/Couch's complex has been recorded in the following months: May (4 reports), June (2 reports), July (2 reports), September (3 reports), and October (2 reports). This is a seasonal pattern similar to the Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and generally in conformance with the movements of austral migrant Tropical Kingbirds discussed above. The abundance of this complex, its migratory tendencies, and its ability to move into newly created habitat provide the impetus for its vagrancy.

All but two of the reports of the complex in Alabama and the Western Panhandle were from migrant traps, the exceptions being one sighted in the Ft. Walton Beach area about 5 mi. inland, and another at Battleship Park in the

Mobile Bay Delta. The author watched a bird of this complex fly in to the tip of the Gulf Breeze peninsula out of the SW on one occasion. These occurrences suggest that these birds, especially the Tropical Kingbirds since they are more migratory in their range, are making overwater crossings. If that is so, there should be observations from the West Indies. However, the Tropical Kingbird does not occur in the West Indies except as a vagrant in Cuba from which are three reports (Garrido & Kirkconnell 2000), and as a rare and irregular migrant on Grenada near the South American coast (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). However, the Fork-tailed Flycatcher is also considered a vagrant in the West Indies (Raffaele *et al.* 1998), yet there are numerous occurrences in North America.

Couch's Kingbird is very rare on the Upper Texas Coast, found in all months except July. There are no records of Tropical Kingbird from the same area (Richardson *et al.* 1998). If the source of Alabama and Florida Tropical Kingbirds were southern Texas and northern Mexico, there should be records from that area. There are several reports for Louisiana where both species have been confirmed (Dittman 2001). Weather can sometimes play a role in bringing vagrants from the south to our shores (Duncan 1994); however, an analysis of weather conditions the day of the sightings and the preceding day on the Alabama and Western Panhandle coasts did not show a correlation. Of eleven reports of the complex since 1987, eight were on light and variable winds, one report on light to moderate E & SE winds and two on moderate to fresh SW to NW winds.

In summary, I suggest that we can expect to find with increasing frequency both Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds in Alabama and the Western Florida Panhandle. This supposition is based on the escalation of sightings in the past two decades and first two years of this century, and proposes that the driving force may be range expansions resulting from deforestation. In the case of the Tropical Kingbird, a rapid colonizer of cleared areas, its migratory tendency is a strong factor in bringing it to our shores. Observations from migrant traps indicate it is probably a trans-Gulf or partial trans-Gulf migrant.

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