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Birds of the Rocky Mountains—Species Accounts, pages 242–261: Flycatchers & Larks

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Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*)

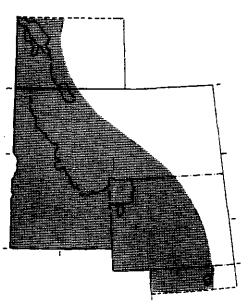
Identification: This flycatcher is usually seen perched on an outer branch of a conifer, where its white underparts contrast strongly with dark gray flanks and upperparts, producing a distinctive two-toned and "vested" appearance. It has a three-parted whistled call, sounding like "Look, three bears!"

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	S	
s	s	S	s
S	s	s	s

s	s	s	s
s	S	s	
	S	S	S

M	M	s	s
M	S	s	S
S		S	S



Status: Widespread in the region west of the plains, primarily in coniferous forests, but also in riparian forests. It occurs in all the montane parks, and probably breeds in all.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with coniferous montane forests, burned over forests, and muskeg areas in the region. Typically tall conifers and open, often boggy or meadow-like areas are present in their territories. Muskeg areas in northern Alberta are favored breeding sites.

Seasonality: Wyoming records extend from May 16 to September 18, with migration peaks in late May and early September. Similarly, in Alberta they usually arrive the third week of May, and leave again in late August. Colorado records are from May 7 to September 20, and egg dates from there are from June 16 to July 20, with nestlings seen to August 1. Fledged young have been seen in Jasper N.P. as early as July 1.

Comments: This flycatcher rarely occurs as low in trees as kingbirds or some of the smaller flycatchers, and instead is usually seen outlined against the sky as it waits for insect prey to come into view. Nests are usually also fairly well elevated, on limbs from about 15 to 50 feet above ground, generally well hidden in a cluster of needles on a horizontal conifer branch.

Suggested Reading: Tvrdik, 1971; Bent, 1932.

Western Wood-pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*)

Identification: This inconspicuous brownish flycatcher is much more likely to be heard than seen; its descending *peer* and two-syllable *pee-a* notes are likely to betray its presence. If seen, the generally dark grayish upperparts, without strong wing-barring or definite pale eye-ring, help to identify it.

Status: Widespread throughout nearly the entire region in summer; breeding occurs in most and probably all of the montane parks.

LATILONG STATUS

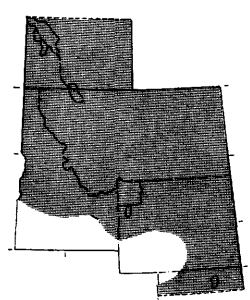
S	S	S	r
s	S	s	S
S	S	S	S

S	S	s	s
s	S	S	S
s	S	S	S

M	s	S	S
	S	S	S
S	S	S	S

Habitats and Ecology: Breeds in most coniferous forest types, and also to a varying extent in aspens, riparian forests, and various open deciduous or mixed woodland habitats. Open forests are favored, especially those dominated by conifers. Nests are well hidden, on horizontal branches of trees, or sometimes on a fork, and are usually well covered with spider webs, to which lichens may be attached for camouflage. However, this behavior is seemingly not so common in this species as in the eastern wood-pewee.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 18 to September 30, and Montana records extend from mid-May to mid-September. In Colorado the extreme dates are April 11 and October 21. There are relatively few egg dates, but in Wyoming they extend from June 20 to July 15, and nestlings have been seen as late as August 26. Colorado egg dates are from May 6 to July 27, and nests with hatched young have been seen in Colorado during May.



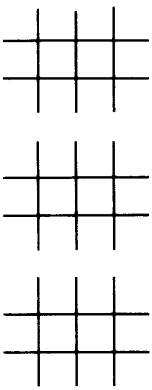
Comments: This is the western member of a species-pair that includes two extremely similar birds. So far, the eastern species has not been found to nest within the region covered by this book, but does extend to the western part of the Dakotas.

Suggested Reading: Beaver & Baldwin, 1975; Eckardt, 1976.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*)

Identification: One of the small flycatchers of the region; this one is notable for its yellowish underparts, its wide yellow eye-ring, and white to yellowish wing-bars. Its call is a *che-bunk* similar to that of the least flycatcher.

LATILONG STATUS



Status: Reported as a migrant or vagrant in May at Banff and Jasper parks; not recorded elsewhere in the region.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with spruce–fir forests and bogs; in Alberta generally found near receding muskegs and at the edges of forests where thick shrubbery shades the forest floor. Alder-edged swamps are another nesting habitat there.

Seasonality: There is little information, but in Alberta the birds do not become very evident until the end of June or early July, when singing becomes apparent. Probably their migration dates are much like those of the other small *Empidonax* species of the region.

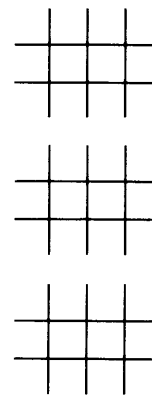
Comments: This species breeds across much of northern Canada, but is extremely elusive and rarely seen either on the breeding grounds or during migration.

Suggested Reading: Walkinshaw & Henry, 1957.

Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax alnorum*)

Identification: A small flycatcher with a fairly inconspicuous eye-ring, definite wing-bars, and somewhat yellowish underparts. Its song, a buzzy, falling *fee-beeo*, provides the best field identification guide. Not separable from the willow flycatcher visually.

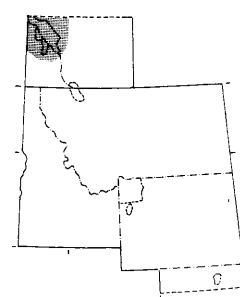
LATILONG STATUS



Status: An uncommon summer resident in the northwestern portions of the region, breeding in the montane parks of Alberta south to at least Kootenay and Banff. Not reported elsewhere in the region.

Habitats and Ecology: This species and the willow flycatcher are so similar in most regards that the literature on them is greatly confused. However, this species seems to breed over most of the same general area as the willow flycatcher, in birch or willow thickets, along the edges of muskegs, forest margins, streamside shrubbery, and wooded lakeshores.

Seasonality: There is little information, but in Banff and Jasper parks the species have been reported from mid-May to the latter part of August.



Comments: Much more work is needed to determine the relative abundance and ranges of this species and the willow flycatcher where they both occur.

Suggested Reading: Aldrich, 1953; Robbins, 1974.

Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax trailli*)

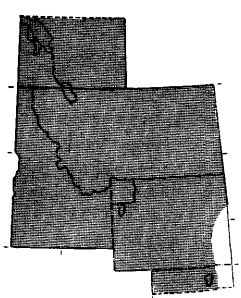
Identification: A small flycatcher with a faint eye-ring, white wing-bars, and pale olive-gray to yellowish underparts. Best recognized by its song, a sneeze-like *fitz-bew*.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	S	s
s	S	s	M
S	S	S	s

s	s		s
s	S	s	
s	S	s	S

s	s	M	s
M	S		M
s	s	S	S



Status: A summer resident over nearly all of the region except for some of the low plains areas in the east. Present and probably breeds in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Especially associated with riparian or wetland habitats in this region, including willow thickets, low gallery forests along streams, prairie coulees, and, farther north, in woodland edge habitats such as muskegs and boggy openings.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from May 18 to September 19, and in Montana the birds usually arrive in mid-May and leave by the first week of September. Banff and Jasper records are from mid-May to mid-August. Egg records in Colorado are from late June to July 8, and in Montana active nests have been reported throughout July.

Comments: This is a typical edge-adapted species, which usually nests no more than about six feet above ground in the crotches of shrubs or small trees, usually at the edge of a thicket or shrub so that easy entrance and exit are possible. The males typically sing from the highest point in the territory, sometimes up to 30 times per minute.

Suggested Reading: Walkinshaw, 1966; Holcomb, 1972; King, 1955; Ashmole, 1968.

Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*)

Identification: A small, grayish flycatcher with buffy wing-bars, a distinct eye-ring, and a rather more grayish cast on the upperparts than typical of the similar willow flycatcher. Its song is a sharp *che-bek* with the second syllable emphasized, and frequently repeated.

Status: A common summer resident in the northern and northeastern parts of the region, south through Montana and central Wyoming. Most common in the montane parks of Alberta, where it regularly breeds. Possibly a rare breeder in Glacier N.P.

LATILONG STATUS

M	s	s	
	s	s	S
V	M	s	

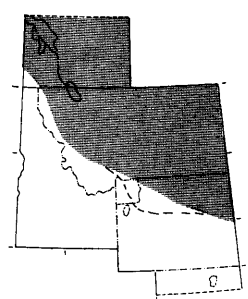
S	s	S	s
	?	s	
	M	s	S

		s	M
	s		
			M

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open and edge-dominated habitats such as floodplain forests in prairie areas, scattered prairie grovelands, shelterbelts, woody lake margins, and urban parks or gardens.

Seasonality: Reported in Wyoming and Montana from early May to late August, and in Colorado from May 3 to September 23. Noted in Banff and Jasper parks from early May to early September.

Comments: This is a very common and widespread species of *Empidonax* which breeds in company with four other species of the same genus in Banff and Jasper parks. Presumably minor habitat differences help to reduce competition among all of these very similar forms.



Suggested Reading: Davis, 1959; Nice & Collias, 1961; Breckenridge, 1956; McQueen, 1950.

Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*)

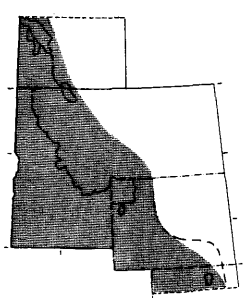
Identification: This tiny flycatcher is typically found in tall coniferous forests having a closed canopy. Its eye-ring and wing-bars are well developed, and it is generally ashy gray to dusky in coloration. Its song is an emphatic, variable sequence of burry and low-pitched notes, usually in three parts.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	
s	S	s	?
S	S	S	s

S	S		s
s	S		
s	s	S	S

M	s	s	M
	s	M	M
s	S	S	S



Status: A summer resident in coniferous forests over most of the region, occasional to common in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with tall, mature montane coniferous forests, probably from about 7000 to 10,000 feet in this region. Often found along willow and alder-lined mountain streams, with males sometimes singing at elevations above timberline.

Seasonality: Records for Wyoming are from May 13 to October 9, and for Colorado from May 13 to September 19. In Montana the birds are usually present from early May to late August, and in Banff and Jasper parks they have been seen from mid-May to mid-August. There are Colorado nest records for the latter half of June, and eggs reported from Montana from June 26 to July 2.

Comments: This is another of the small and rather elusive flycatchers of the western states, which often demand great patience and expertise in observation and identification.

Suggested Reading: Davis, 1954; Johnson, 1963; Manuwal, 1970; Beaver & Baldwin, 1975.

Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*)

Identification: A small grayish flycatcher that has a faint eye-ring, very faint wing-bars, dull olive-gray underparts, and a song that is a combination of low-pitched, burry notes and clear ascending notes, often of three or four phrase elements and ending on a clear, high note.

Status: A summer resident in most areas west of the plains; present but variably common in all the montane parks, and breeding in most.

LATILONG STATUS

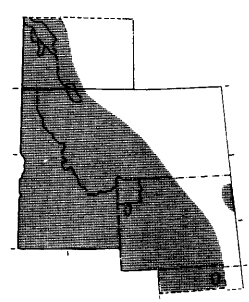
S	S	S	s
s	S	S	s
S	S	S	S

S	S	s	s
S	S		
	S	S	S

s	s	S	M
S	S	S	S

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open woodland and shrubby habitats, ranging from riparian edges through oak–mountain mahogany woodlands, to aspens and open ponderosa pine woods. In Montana, brushy, logged-over slopes seem to be favored habitats.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 6 to September 15, with migration peaks in May and early September. In Montana the birds arrive in early May, and depart in late August. Banff and Jasper park records are from mid-May to late August. Colorado egg records are from May 30 to July 27, and in Montana egg records extend from July 15 to late July.



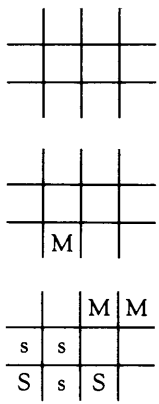
Comments: Dusky flycatchers tend to occupy rather drier habitats than many of the other *Empidonax* species of the region, and they frequently nest in low trees or shrubs, from about three to eight feet above ground.

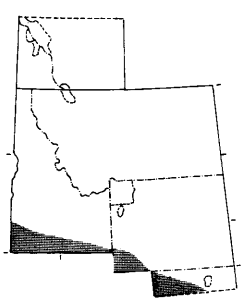
Suggested Reading: Johnson, 1966; Sedgewick, 1975; Bent, 1942.

Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*)

Identification: This is one of the nondescript *Empidonax* flycatchers, which is distinctly grayish above (slightly more olive-colored in fall), with an inconspicuous eye-ring and rather faint wing-bars. Its upper bill is blackish, while the lower one is mostly yellow, but becomes darker toward the tip. Its call is a double *chip-wip* or *chi-bit*, usually followed by a higher and more liquid note. The song is uttered emphatically, often with intervals of only one or two seconds between phrases.

LATILONG STATUS





Status: A local summer resident in the southwestern portions of the region, especially where pinyon pines and junipers form an open woodland habitat type, often with interspersed sagebrush. Less frequently they occur in sagebrush scrub, or in dense brush near streams in semi-arid areas.

Habitats and Ecology: In western Colorado these birds are typically found in pinyon-juniper woodlands, where they are a characteristic breeding species, nesting either in forks of junipers or sometimes in sagebrush. The nests are typically constructed of the weathered outside strands of juniper bark, which makes them very difficult to find in the junipers.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from April 27 to September 5, with egg records for late May and early June.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1942; Johnson, 1963.

Western Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*)

Identification: A small, yellow-tinted flycatcher with faint eye-rings and wing-bars, and with a distinctly yellow throat and underparts. The song is high-pitched, and consists of a series of thin, squeaky whistles and more snappy notes.

Status: A summer resident over much of the region, mainly near streams; probably present in all the montane parks, but a common breeder only in Rocky Mountain N.P., where it is the most common small flycatcher.

LATILONG STATUS

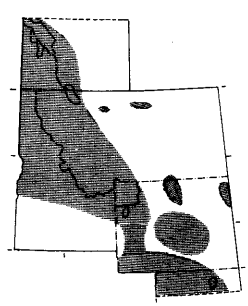
S	M	s	
	s		?
S	S	s	

s	s		s
M	S	s	
	s	S	S

	S	s	S
S	S	M	M
s	S	S	S

Habitats and Ecology: A widespread and adaptable small flycatcher, ranging from riparian woodlands through aspens into the coniferous forest zones, all the way to the upper spruce–fir zones. Extends out into sagebrush areas during the non-breeding season.

Seasonality: Colorado records are from April 7 to September 9, while Wyoming records extend from May 20 to September 13. In Montana the birds are usually present from late May to August. Colorado egg records are from June 3 to July 23, and a few records for Wyoming and Montana are from July 17 to July 6.



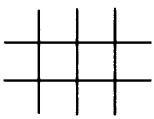
Comments: In Rocky Mountain N.P. this flycatcher nests in a wide variety of sites, ranging from rocky ledges to open garages and underneath porch roofs. In the Black Hills region the birds seek out canyons that offer a combination of shady sites and where streams or other moist habitats are nearby.

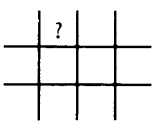
Suggested Reading: Beaver & Baldwin, 1975; Verbeck, 1975; Davis et al., 1963.

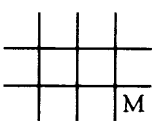
Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*)

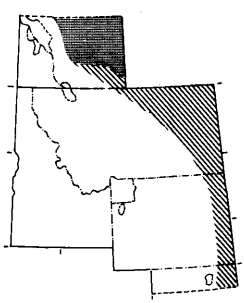
Identification: This flycatcher is distinctly grayish, with a nearly black head, a blackish tail that is often pumped up and down while the bird is perching, and has whitish underparts that are paler than those of any other flycatchers of the area. The usual song is a spoken *phe-be*, unlike the whistled *phe-bee* calls of chickadees.

LATILONG STATUS









Status: A summer resident in eastern Alberta, and a migrant through the other eastern portions of the region east of the mountains. Rare in Banff N.P., and unreported for the other montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with woodland edges, wooded ravines near water, woodlots, and lakes or streams in partially wooded areas. Often breeds close to humans, nesting on building ledges, or on the understructure of bridges.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from March 11 to October 1, with egg records from May 10 to May 30. In Alberta these birds usually arrive shortly after the middle of April, and remain until August. By May they have established territories, and although specific egg records are unavailable the active period of breeding is probably from early May to late June.

Comments: This eastern species of flycatcher is one of the earliest of its group to migrate north, often arriving long before insects are abundant, and the males establish territories well before the potential egg-laying period. The laying period is fairly long, and two broods are usually raised per pair in this species.

Suggested Reading: Faanes, 1980; Smith, 1969; Bent, 1942.

Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*)

Identification: This species somewhat resembles the eastern species, but is strongly tinted with rusty brown on the lower breast and belly. Like the eastern species, it often pumps its tail up and down. Its song is a frequently repeated *chu-weer.*

Status: A summer resident over most of the region, but infrequent in the mountains and generally rare or absent from the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Generally associated with grasslands, sagebrush, and agricultural areas in the region, especially prairie coulees and steep, eroded river banks. They sometimes reach foothill areas, but do not breed in the wooded mountain zones.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 7 to October 3, with migration peaks in April and September. In Alberta they are usually seen from the last week of April to early or mid-September. Colorado egg records are from March 23 to June 17, while Montana nesting records are from May 11 to July 2.

Comments: These birds are typically found in rather dry regions, where their brownish earth colors seem especially appropriate. They often use sunny canyons, open areas near buildings, and lower montane meadows, sometimes well away from any water. Nesting is often done on rock ledges, or even in caves or old mine shafts.

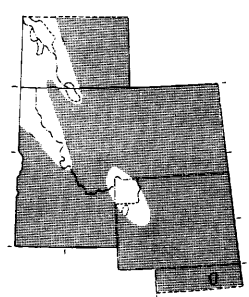
Suggested Reading: Schukman, 1974; Ohlendorf, 1976.

LATILONG STATUS

M	M	s	S
M	S	s	S
V	s	S	S

S	M	S	S
M	S		S
	M	s	S

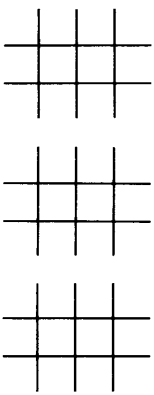
M	M	S	s
S	S	S	S
S	S	s	S



Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*)

Identification: Males of this species are unmistakably brilliant crimson on the crown and most of the underparts, while the rear part of the head and back are blackish. Females are more brownish, but are also heavily washed with reddish on the underparts.

LATILONG STATUS



Status: An accidental vagrant in the area, with a record for Watertown Lakes N.P. one of the few in the region. A rare migrant in Colorado, with a reported case of breeding in the Sterling latilong of northeastern Colorado.

Habitats and Ecology: In Texas, where this species breeds regularly, it is associated with open grasslands having scattered junipers and oaks, as well as water areas lined by cottonwoods, willows, oaks, and other trees. It is usually associated with water, but is not associated with deep canyons.

Seasonality: There are not many regional records, but in Colorado the birds have been reported between April and December.

Comments: This is a desert-adapted species, extending from the American southwest well into Mexico in the Sonoran Desert region.

Suggested Reading: Smith, 1970; Taylor & Hanson, 1970.

Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

Identification: This flycatcher is of the same general size and shape as are kingbirds, but are rusty brown on the wings and tail, and have whitish throats and underparts, becoming yellowish toward the belly. The usual song is a series of *pe-reer* notes, and its usual calls are *ha-whip* and *pe-reer* notes.

Status: A summer resident in the southwestern portions of the region, rare or absent from the montane parks. However, common in summer at Dinosaur N.M., and an almost certain breeder there. A local breeder in southwestern Wyoming (*American Birds* 35:964).

Habitats and Ecology: A desert species associated with mesquite and cactus deserts and, in this region, open pinyon–juniper woodlands, grasslands with scattered trees, and gulches or riparian edges in dry country.

Seasonality: Colorado records are from March 25 to September 17, and eggs have been reported from there in May.

Comments: This is a part of the southwestern desert avifauna that has moved north through the basin-and-range areas of Utah to the Snake River valley of Idaho, where it reaches its northernmost limits.

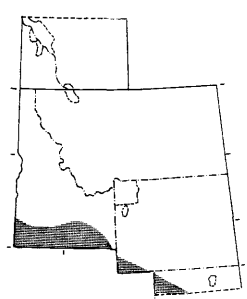
Suggested Reading: Lanyon, 1961; Bent, 1942.

LATILONG STATUS

V		V	
	V		
	V	V	V

			?
	V		
		M	M

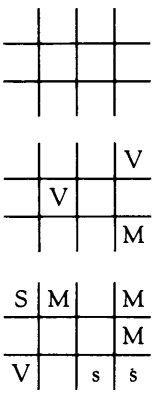
		M	
S	s		
S	s	V	V



Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferus*)

Identification: This rather large flycatcher closely resembles the more widespread western kingbird, but lacks white outer tail feathers, which instead are narrowly tipped with white. It is found in dry, semidesert regions that are more brushy or wooded than those usually used by western kingbirds, and its call is a rough, nasal *chic-queer,* with the second note accented.

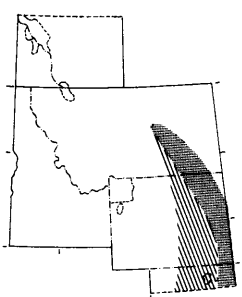
LATILONG STATUS



Status: A local summer resident in the high plains east of the mountains, from central Montana southward. Once reported from Rocky Mountain N.P., but apparently now extirpated, with no recent records.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open country, usually with scattered trees, or with open woodlands, and extending out into grasslands and agricultural lands where there are locally available trees for nesting. However, bushes and posts may at times also be used as nesting sites.

Seasonality: Reported in Colorado from April 17 to September 23, in Wyoming from May 6 to September 18, and in Montana from May 22 to September 3. Active nests in Colorado have been noted between May 15 and July 1.



Comments: In some areas both western kingbirds and Cassin's kingbirds occur locally, and in one such area of Arizona it was found that the Cassin's kingbird was most abundant locally where pine or oak woodlands were transitional with deserts, while western kingbirds were in more desertlike habitats.

Suggested Reading: Ohlendorf, 1974; Hespenheide, 1964.

Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*)

Identification: This common flycatcher has an ashy gray head and back, a black tail that is edged on each side with white, and a yellowish belly. Its song is a complex and loud mixture of notes, often uttered in flight.

Status: A summer resident in most of the region, but infrequent in montane areas, and rare or absent from the northern montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: This species is always associated with edge habitats near open country, such as shelterbelts, hedgerows, margins of forests, tree-lined residential districts, riparian forests, and the like.

Seasonality: Reported in Colorado from April 6 to September 22, and in Wyoming from May 5 to September 13, with peak migrations in May and August. In Montana and Alberta the birds usually arrive about mid-May, and are mostly gone by the end of August. Colorado egg records are from May 29 to July 2, and in Wyoming and Montana the egg records are for mid- to late June, with nestlings observed as late as late August.

Comments: A highly conspicuous species, owing to its high level of territorial behavior, and its generally fearless behavior, often threatening or chasing much larger birds away from its nesting area.

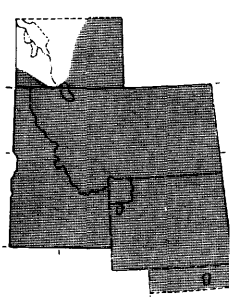
Suggested Reading: Smith, 1966; Ohlendorf, 1974; Whedon, 1938; Hespenheide, 1964.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	s	s
S	S	?	s
S	S	S	s

S	s	S	S
s	S	s	S
s	M	M	S

s	s	S	s
M	M	M	M
S	S	S	S



Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*)

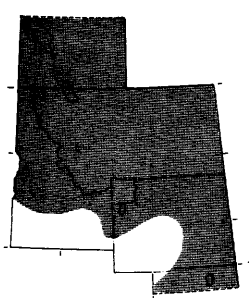
Identification: Similar in size and shape to the western kingbird, but with more black and white underparts and a white-tipped black tail. It is as noisy as the western kingbird, and its song is a long series of chirps and twitters.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	S	S
S	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
S	S	s	S
s	M	S	S

s	S	S	s
M	s	M	M
s	s	s	S



Status: A summer resident nearly throughout the region, except in the drier areas of the southwest. Present in all the montane parks, and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open areas with scattered trees or tall shrubs, such as forest edges, fencerows, riparian areas, agricultural lands, farmsteads, etc.

Seasonality: Colorado records are from April 24 to September 19, and Wyoming records extend from May 5 to September 18. In Montana and southern Alberta the birds are usually present from early May to mid-September. Colorado egg records are from June 7 to July 24, and similar dates are typical for farther north in the region.

Comments: Like the western kingbird, this is one of the noisiest small birds of the region, and from the time of its arrival until nesting is well underway its screaming calls and chases of other birds are familiar sights. Sometimes birds such as orioles seem to nest preferentially in the same trees as kingbirds, perhaps gaining protection from possible predators such as jays or crows because of the watchful behavior of the kingbirds.

Suggested Reading: Smith, 1966; Morehouse & Brewer, 1968.

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Muscivora forficata*)

Identification: This highly distinctive flycatcher is unique in having a long, forked tail that is longer than the body, as well as a pale grayish body and head, with pinkish to red underwings. Females have a tail that is only slightly forked, but also exhibit pale pink on the underwings and "armpit" area.

Status: An accidental vagrant in the region. Reported for at least three Montana latilongs, once from Wyoming, and from numerous locations in Colorado, where it breeds in the extreme southeastern corner of the state.

LATILONG STATUS

	V	

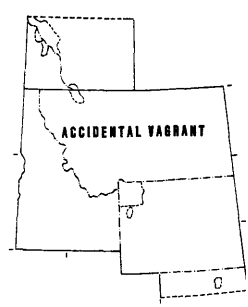
	V	

		V
V		V

Habitats and Ecology: This species is found in open to semiopen habitats having a scattering of trees or other elevated nesting sites, such as buildings, and in riparian areas. Where trees are lacking, windmills, utility poles, or other structures are used as substitutes for nest sites.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from April 24 to November 9, and active nests have been seen from May 31 to June 23.

Comments: Like other flycatchers, this species is highly territorial, but nonetheless males breeding in a particular area often congregate for roosting together, and return in the morning to their respective nests to help feed their offspring. After fledging, the young birds join these roosting groups, which eventually may number more than 200 birds.



Suggested Reading: Fitch, 1950; Bent, 1942.

Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*)

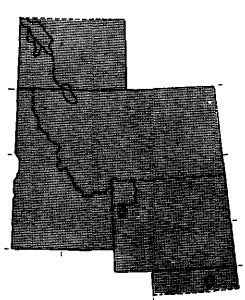
Identification: This prairie and grassland species has feathered "horns" that are visible only at close range; the white-edged black tail and somewhat pinkish brown upperpart coloration are more useful as fieldmarks, as is the black breastband. In spring, the male often sings an extended flight song above his territory that is a high-pitched assortment of tinkling notes.

LATILONG STATUS

M	M	S	r
	r	r	S
R	R	R	r

S	R	s	R
S	R	R	R
r	r	R	R

r	R	R	R
R	R	R	R
R	R	R	R



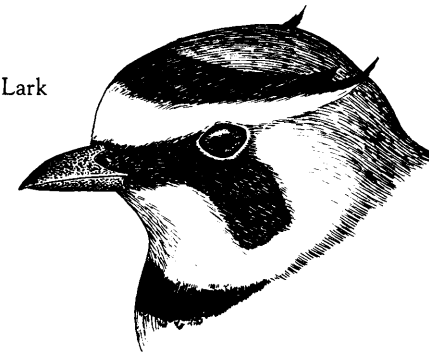
Status: Present throughout the entire region, and resident in most areas, although migratory movements do occur. Present in nearly all the montane parks, and breeding in several.

Habitats and Ecology: Open-country habitats, ranging from shortgrass plains through agricultural lands such as pastures, desert scrub, mountain meadows, and alpine tundra, are the basic requirements for this species, which has an enormous ecological and geographic range in North America.

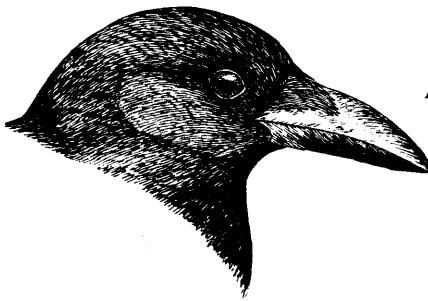
Seasonality: Essentially resident in the southern parts of the region, and among the earliest of spring migrants in Alberta, often arriving in small numbers by mid-February, but with large flocks appearing in April. The major southward movement is in September, with small groups usually wintering in the southern parts of the province. Nest records in Colorado are from mid-April to early July, and in Wyoming egg records are from April 15 to July 23. A large sample of nest records from Montana extend from April 10 to July 19.

Comments: This is the only native North American member of the true lark family, which is well represented in the Old World, and includes such famous singers as the skylark.

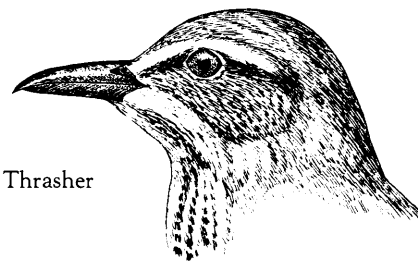
Suggested Reading: Behle, 1942; Pickwell, 1931; Beason & Franks, 1974; Verbeek, 1967.



Horned Lark



American Crow



Sage Thrasher