

3-2008

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Mollhoff, Wayne J.; Gubanyi, Joseph; and Brogie, Mark A., "First Report of Ash-Throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) Breeding in the Nebraska Panhandle Region" (2008). *Nebraska Bird Review*. 1032.

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FIRST REPORT OF ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER
(*Myiarchus cinerascens*) BREEDING IN THE
NEBRASKA PANHANDLE REGION

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This report presents evidence of the breeding of Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) in mixed conifer woodland in the Nebraska Panhandle Region, 160 miles north of its nearest known breeding area. In addition, it presents the first photographic evidence and the second accepted record by the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (NOURC) of the presence of Ash-throated Flycatcher in Nebraska.

On 28 June 2007 Wayne Mollhoff observed an adult Ash-throated Flycatcher while conducting a survey in Priority Block K409 in Kimball County, Nebraska, for the Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Project II. The bird was observed on private property in limber pine (*Pinus flexilis*) habitat from a county road approximately one mile south of Interstate 80 Exit 1, and 1.2 miles east of the Wyoming state line. After obtaining permission from the landowner, the area was searched more extensively and a second observation of an Ash-throated Flycatcher was made about 400 yards farther east of the site of the initial observation. During the second sighting, the bird appeared to be carrying food in its beak. Attempts to relocate the bird(s) the following morning, both west and east of the site of the initial find, were unsuccessful. With only a single accepted record in the state (Mollhoff 1989), Mollhoff sent a written documentation of the sighting to the chair of the NOURC, Mark Brogie.

On 9 July 2007, Mark Brogie and NOURC member Joseph Gubanyi attempted to relocate the bird and obtain a photograph and recording of its call in hopes of upgrading its status in Nebraska from Class III (written description only,

by a single observer) to Class I (diagnostic specimen, photo, or recording) (Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee 1986). After playing a recording of an Ash-throated Flycatcher call, they observed an adult Ash-throated Flycatcher that evening and again the following morning at the site where the bird was initially observed, and obtained photographs of the bird and a recording of its call. The bird, which was slightly smaller than Cassin's Kingbirds seen nearby, was identified as a *Myiarchus* species by its size, dull grayish-brown upper parts, washed out creamy yellow belly, extensively rufous tail and rufous patch at base of the primaries on folded wings. The underside of the tail, seen on the bird when perched, had a dark terminal band which was wider on the lateral portion of the tail tip than the medial portion. The dark terminal band created the teardrop rufous pattern which is found only in adult Ash-throated Flycatchers and a small percentage of Nutting's Flycatchers (*Myiarchus nuttingi*). The combination of the tail pattern and the distinctive vocalizations are diagnostic for Ash-throated Flycatcher (Cardiff and Dittmann 2002; Dittmann and Cardiff 2000). Photographs and recordings were submitted to the NOURC and accepted, elevating Ash-throated Flycatcher from Class III to Class I in Nebraska (Mark Brogie, NOURC chair, personal communication).

The bird was found in an area of open mixed conifer woodland, dominated by limber pine, with a scattered mix of Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*) and ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), growing on the north-facing rocky slopes of low ridges and ravines. The tree cover ranged from fairly thick clumps that provided complete ground cover in small areas to widely scattered individual trees and ranged in height from 6 to 50 feet. Scattered clumps of fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) were found throughout the wooded area. The ground cover community was a mosaic of mixed-grass and short-grass prairie as described by Kaul et al. (2006). Principal ground cover plants were little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), and threadleaf sedge (*Carex filifolia*). Gravel, broken rock, rock ledges, and outcrops were common on the steeper slopes. This fits the description of the semiarid to arid scrub and open conifer woodland habitat described as typical for Ash-throated Flycatcher habitat (Bent 1942, Cardiff and Dittmann 2002, Corman and Wise-Gervais 2005, Kingery 1998).

Brogie and Gubanyi noted an agitated response to the recording of an Ash-throated Flycatcher call. Based on this behavior and repeated use of the same limited area, we believed it possible that the bird was on territory or possibly breeding in the area. With the possibility of adding an unexpected breeder to the atlas project, Mollhoff returned to the area on 18 July 2007 in an attempt to document breeding. Permission to search the area was again obtained and an unsuccessful search for the birds was made of the area where the bird was first observed, including a search for possible nest cavities in dead trees within a 75-100 acre area to the west of the original sighting. A single dead limber pine snag, riddled with woodpecker holes, was found hidden in a clump of trees in the immediate area where the bird was first observed. The largest cavity, a rotted-out woodpecker hole, 3.5 inches in diameter and 5 inches deep, contained a vacated nest consistent with that described for the species (cup of grasses, lined with softer material and a few feathers). The nest did not fit the appearance of any other cavity nesters seen or likely to be found in the area. The following morning, 19 July, a second unsuccessful search was made in the

area of the nest. A search was then made in the area up to 600 yards farther east of the initial sighting, including the area where a bird had been seen carrying what appeared to be food on 28 June. At 0730, an agitated Ash-throated Flycatcher responded to a recording of its call. A second Ash-throated Flycatcher soon appeared carrying an insect in its beak. The two birds were observed for 10 minutes when a third bird landed in a nearby pine. Close observation of this bird revealed a rounded head profile even when the crown feathers were raised and a tail that was cinnamon-colored to the tip when viewed from below, indicating a juvenile bird. After a moment, the bird with the insect approached the juvenile, whereupon the juvenile fluttered its wings in a typical begging display. The adult responded by feeding it the insect in its beak. Less than a minute later, the adult captured another flying insect and repeated the action. At 0810 the birds flew over a low ridge and out of sight to the east and were not observed again.

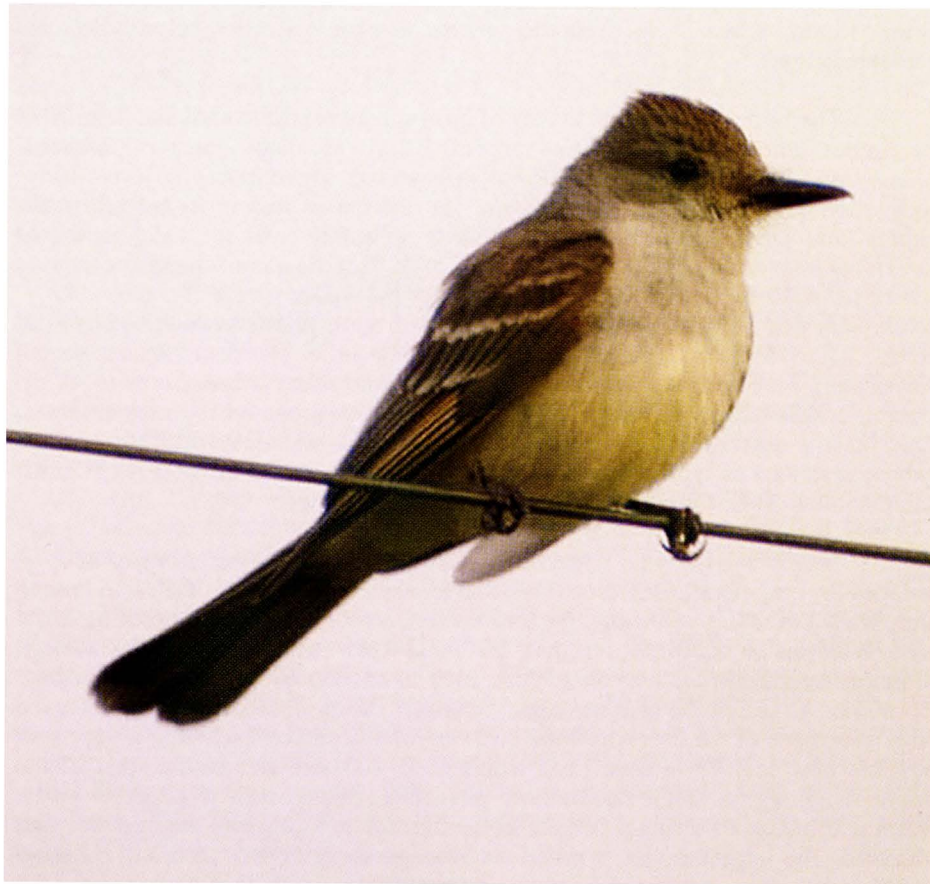


Photo 1. Ash-throated Flycatcher observed 10 July 2007 in Kimball County, Nebraska (Photo by Joe Gubanyi)



Photo 2. Ash-throated Flycatcher observed 10 July 2007 in Kimball County, Nebraska (Photo by Joe Gubanyi)

Sharpe et al. (2001) listed Ash-throated Flycatcher as "Accidental in fall" in Nebraska. Ash-throated Flycatcher was placed on "The Official List of the Birds of Nebraska" (Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee 1997) by the NOURC based on a description of a single bird observed by Richard and Dorothy Rosche north of Chadron, Dawes Co., 29 August, 1987 (Mollhoff 1989). There are three additional reports of Ash-throated Flycatcher in Nebraska. A single bird with no details published was reported in 1957 to the editor of the Nebraska Bird Review (Bray et al. 1986, Sharpe et al. 2001). A bird was reported calling in Sowbelly Canyon, Sioux Co., 20 July 2000 by observers experienced with the species (Silcock 2000a). This record was not reviewed by the NOURC. A record of a single bird observed at Riverside Park, Scotts Bluff Co., 4 September 2000 (Silcock 2000b) was not accepted by the NOURC because the description did not eliminate other *Myiarchus* species (Jorgensen 2002). There is an additional record of a set of eggs labeled as Ash-throated Flycatcher collected in Otoe County in 1907 and stored in the University of Nebraska State Museum (ZM 08555). It was assumed the eggs were misidentified at the time of collection (Ducey 1988, Sharpe et al. 2001).

Ash-throated Flycatchers are found in arid to semiarid habitat in the southwestern U.S. including most of Texas west of the Brazos River, the panhandles

of Texas and Oklahoma, the southern and western parts of Colorado, all or most of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California (Cardiff and Dittmann 2002). Ash-throated Flycatcher reaches the northern limits of its range in southwest Wyoming, southeast Idaho, and north into Oregon and Washington along the eastern slopes of the Cascades (Cardiff and Dittmann 2002). Ash-throated Flycatcher has not been recorded in South Dakota (Tallman et al. 2002), Iowa (Kent and Dinsmore 1996), or Missouri (Jacobs 2001), and in Kansas is known only from the southwest corner of the state (Thompson and Ely, 1989). Vagrant Ash-throated Flycatchers have been reported regularly in early winter along the U.S. East (Murphy 1982) and Gulf coasts.

The nearest known breeding area to the Nebraska Panhandle Region is about 160 miles south near Colorado Springs, El Paso Co., Colorado (Kingery 1998). During the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas Project, breeding was documented from that area, southeast to the southeast corner of Colorado bordering Kansas (Kingery 1998). Although not reported breeding during the Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas Project (Busby and Zimmerman 2001), Ash-throated Flycatcher has bred in Morton County in extreme southwest Kansas (Boyd 1985). In Wyoming, breeding has been confirmed only in Sweetwater Co. along the southern border west of the continental divide (Dorn and Dorn 1990).

Hopefully, observers will look for Ash-throated Flycatchers and other southwestern species in appropriate habitat in the Nebraska panhandle. Only time and more study will tell if this represents a range expansion or an isolated event and whether other scrub-related, xeric-adapted species will follow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank John Gross for allowing access to Gross-Wilkerson Ranches for the Bird Atlas Project and the follow up needed to complete this study. Joel Jorgensen, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and Thomas E. Labedz, University of Nebraska State Museum, provided information on regional distribution of Ash-throated Flycatchers. We thank Steve Cardiff and Donna Dittmann for reviewing an earlier version of the manuscript and making editorial comments that improved the manuscript.

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