

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER - TYRANNUS FORFICATUS

Taxonomy: Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Passeriformes Family: Tyrannidae Genus: Tyrannus
Species: T. forficatus

Habitat:

Biomes: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers breed in savannas with scattered trees, shrubs, and patches of brush in the south-central U.S. and just over the border into northern Mexico. They also breed in towns, farm fields, pastures, and landscaped areas like golf courses or parks—areas with a mixture of feeding perches, open space, and trees for nesting. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers spend the winter in southern Mexico and Central America, in humid savannas, pastures, agricultural lands, scrublands, villages, towns, and the edges of tropical deciduous forests. They commonly stay below 5,000 feet elevation but occasionally winter at up to 7,500 feet. Sometimes they roost in towns and disperse to the countryside to forage.

Distribution:

In US: Their breeding habitat is open shrubby country with scattered trees in the south-central states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas; western portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri; far eastern New Mexico; and northeastern Mexico. Reported sightings record occasional stray visitors as far north as southern Canada and as far east as Florida and Georgia. They migrate through Texas and eastern Mexico to their winter non-breeding range, from southern Mexico to Panama.

In Other Countries: NONE

Holistic Description: An elegant gray and salmon-pink flycatcher festooned with an absurdly long tail, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is the bird to look for on fence wires in the south-central United States. They typically perch in the open, where their long, forked tails make an unmistakable silhouette. The tail proves useful as they expertly catch insects on the wing with sharp midair twists and turns. In late summer and early fall, scissor-tails gather in large, bickering flocks to migrate to Mexico and Central America.

Species Richness: NO SUBSPECIES

Population Dynamic: CHECK THREATS

Evolution and Systematics:

Evolution: NONE

Systematics: No variation in plumage or body size has been described across this species rather small breeding range. Along with flycatchers of the genera Myiarchus, Pitangus, Myiozetes, Myiodynastes, Attila and a host of others—the genus Tyrannus is in the nominate subfamily, Tyranninae, of the Tyrannidae, the speciose (>400 species) family of tyrant flycatchers confined to the New World, particularly the Neotropics.

Number of Species: NO SUBSPECIES

Number of Genera: NO SUBSPECIES

Physical Characteristics:

Size and Length: Length: 8.7-14.6 in (22-37 cm) Weight: 1.3-2.0 oz (36-56 g)

Wingspan: 15 cm (5.9 in)

Coloration: These are pale gray birds with blackish wings and black tails with white edges. Adults have salmon-pink flanks that extend to underwing patches that are very conspicuous in flight. Males are more intensely colored than females.

General Body Features: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are slender, stout-billed kingbirds with very long, stiff, deeply forked tails. Males have longer tail feathers than females and immature.

Special Features of the Body: The dappled coloration of the Flycatchers, especially on the chest and belly, helps them create a visual paradox to those looking at an individual on the treetop from the ground level, thus helping them stay concealed among the colorful canopies of the deciduous forests. The sharp, pointed beaks assist them in catching the insects with an accurate target and breaking the shells before consuming.

Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs: The hooked bill that makes capturing insects on the wing much more efficient and the rictal bristles originating near the gape of the bird's mouth.

Dentition: BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

Special Features of the Limbs and Digits: ANISODACTYL for efficient perching.

Any Special Internal Anatomy: Rictal bristles function as a sort of physical trap or net to allow birds to more efficiently scoop up insects as they foraged through the air but today the consensus among ornithologists seems to be that the real function of rictal bristles is sensory, letting the bird know its speed and orientation in the air.

Sexual Dimorphisms: Tail length highly variable in both sexes: males average about 22 cm (range 14–26), females about 15 cm. Female and juvenile generally paler, exhibiting less intense salmon and scarlet coloration. Length and shape of notch on

tip of outer primary may be reliable for distinguishing sexes in at least the second calendar year (male notch 19–22 mm, female notch 10–15 mm).

Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult: Female and juvenile generally paler, exhibiting less intense salmon and scarlet coloration. Because juveniles, including breeding second-year males, have tail length well within range of adult females, tail length alone cannot reliably be used to distinguish sexes.

Behavior:

Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular: Diurnal

Activity: The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher flies in straight lines with fast wingbeats, its tail folded. It also often hovers with its tail spread or makes abrupt turns in midair. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers form large roosts during spring and fall migration, and they flock in winter as well. In some populations the males continue roosting in groups throughout the breeding season, but breeding birds tend to forage alone or in pairs. Males arrive before females in the early spring to establish and defend territories. After pairing up, both males and females chase and attack other individuals that intrude onto their territory. Trespassing happens frequently, especially in the early morning, so keep an eye out if you see these birds as you may be treated to an amazing aerial chase. Pairs are monogamous within a breeding season but don't always reunite in later years. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers attack intruding Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, Turkey Vultures, Mourning Doves, Great-tailed Grackles, Common Grackles, Northern Mockingbirds, Western Kingbirds, Loggerhead Shrikes, House Sparrows, American Crows, Blue Jays, and Lark Sparrows.

Locomotion: Rarely walks on the ground or in tree branches. Flies with rapid wing beats; straight flight with folded tail. Hovers with rapid wing beat and spread rectrices, often making abrupt midair turns.

Communication and Perception: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers sing a series of sharp notes that sound rather like a puppy playing with a squeaky toy, rising in pitch and speeding up toward the end of the song. They sing from conspicuous perches like trees and wires. Like other flycatchers, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers probably do not learn their songs, but instead use innate cues.

Home Range: During the breeding season, territory encompasses nesting and feeding area. Males establish and defend territories in early spring before the major influx of arriving females. After pairing, females participate in territorial defense. Sometimes nests near other avian species, including potential predators and competitors such as Eastern and Western kingbirds and Red-tailed Hawk, and does not exclude them from the territory.

Degree of Sociality: Generally solitary or in pairs on breeding grounds. Gregarious, forming flocks of varying sizes during and just before migration and on wintering grounds. Generally disperses from flocks and forages solitarily or in pairs. Rarely forages in flocks.

Level of Aggression: Males attack and chase one another and females on breeding grounds. Females also engage in intraspecific attack behavior, apparently associated with territorial defense, especially after the incubation period. Attacking and chasing occur most frequently in early morning; birds of both sexes intrude onto adjacent territories, often appearing near the nest.

Migration: Medium-distance migrant. During both spring and fall migration between the south-central United States and Central America, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers tend to wander widely and can show up pretty much anywhere throughout North America.

Predators:

Predators: Cooper's Hawk, American Crow, Snakes, Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, Turkey Vultures, Mourning Doves, Great-tailed Grackles, Common Grackles, Northern Mockingbirds, Western Kingbirds, Loggerhead Shrikes, House Sparrows, American Crows, Blue Jays, and Lark Sparrows

Anti-Predator Defenses: NONE, USE AGONISTIC BEHAVIOR AND ACTIVITY

Diet and Nutrition:

Adult Diet: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers eat insects, particularly grasshoppers, crickets and beetles. They occasionally eat fruit, particularly on their wintering grounds. They usually forage between ground level and 30 feet off the ground, snatching insects from the air or gleaning them from vegetation. Between insect-catching flights they return to a perch on a fence, wire, or tree branch. Often a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher will swallow a small prey item during the flight back to its perch, but it beats large items against the perch before eating them. Occasionally Scissor-tailed Flycatchers capture insects directly from sparsely vegetated ground. On rare occasions they forage for insects or berries by hopping from branch to branch in live oak, post oak, red mulberry, or hackberry, or by hovering near trees.

Juvenile Diet: Food chiefly grasshoppers and small moths; often crushed with mandibles before presented to young.

Special Adaptations for Getting Prey: Fly-catching is the most common foraging tactic (85%), followed by hopping on ground (10%), incidental in-flight fly-catching (2%), aerial foraging (2%), and hopping in trees (1%); average distance from

perch to prey 6.6 m. Often consumes small prey items during flight to perch. Consumes larger prey items on return to perch after crushing them and beating them against perch.

Reproduction:

Mode of Reproduction: Monogamous

Mating System: Mating system is best categorized as socially monogamous. No reported cases of polygyny or polyandry. In sw. Oklahoma, sex ratio remained biased toward males for at least 4 wk after the first birds arrived.

Mating Season: April to August

Courtship: The male performs a spectacular aerial display during courtship with his long tail forks streaming out behind him.

Territoriality: HOME RANGE

Mating: Pairs copulate on or immediately adjacent to the nest, often at first light. In 2 copulations or attempted copulations observed by Smith, male gave LHV just before mounting, both individuals were silent for about 1 s after mounting, and then one gave a string of LHVs, and female struggled until the male dismounted and flew off.

Nest Placement: The male and female travel together throughout their territory in search of a nest site in open prairie, mesquite prairie, parks, gardens, pastures, croplands, roadsides or saltmarsh edges. When they find a potential nest site in an isolated tree or shrub, they both hop around and test out different spots by pressing themselves against the branches. They choose an open site that's sheltered from the prevailing wind and often shaded by some foliage.

Nest Description: The female builds the nest on her own, often escorted by the male. She may finish the nest in a couple of days or spend a few weeks on it. She builds a rough frame, 5–6 inches across, using coarse materials like plant stems and flowers, oak catkins, cudweed, wool, Spanish moss, peppergrass, tissue, paper, string, thread, and cotton. She makes an inner cup—3 inches across and 2 inches deep—of closely knit cudweed flowers, string, cloth, and cotton, sometimes adding wet soil, caterpillar cocoons, sheep wool, Bermuda grass leaves, cedar bark, chicken feathers, seed silk, cigarette filters, paper, or carpet fuzz. Finally, she lines the nest with tightly woven dried roots, thistledown, cotton fibers, and wooly cudweed leaves.

Egg-Laying: Clutch Size: 3-6 eggs Number of Broods: 1-2 broods Egg Length: 0.8-0.9 in (2-2.4 cm) Egg Width: 0.6-0.8 in (1.5-2 cm) Incubation Period: 13-23 days Nestling Period: 14-17 days Egg Description: White or creamy with dark red, reddish brown, or purple blotches.

Hatching and Incubation/Gestation: Helpless, with reddish brown skin and sparse white down.

Development: Altricial; naked except for sparse white down; skin reddish brown.

Parental Care: By both male and female, although female may feed nestlings more frequently than male. Brooding is exclusively by the female. Food chiefly grasshoppers and small moths; often crushed with mandibles before presented to young.

Lifespan: 10 years to 15 years

Conservation:

Official Federal Status: Least Concern

Special Statutes in Individual States: NONE

Threats: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher numbers declined by about 31% between 1966 and 2014, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 9.5 million with 92% breeding in the U.S., and 50% spending some part of the year in Mexico. The species rates an 11 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is not on the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List. To safeguard nest and perch sites, researchers suggest that leaving strips or patches of brush intact when clearing brush or applying herbicides. The species may be expanding its range in response to forest clearing on both breeding and wintering grounds. Severe thunderstorms or tornadoes can destroy many nests when they interrupt the otherwise hot, sunny weather of the breeding season.

Conservation Efforts: ^^^^^^^

Extra Facts:

1. The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher forms large premigratory roosts in late summer, with up to 1,000 birds in one flock. They often roost near towns, perhaps taking advantage of the large trees as roosting sites.
2. The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher uses many human products in its nest, such as string, cloth, paper, carpet fuzz, and cigarette filters. One study of nests in an urban area in Texas found that artificial materials accounted for 30% of the weight of nests.
3. A member of the kingbird genus *Tyrannus*, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers resemble other kingbirds in behavior, voice, and morphology. Only one other *Tyrannus* species—the Fork-tailed Flycatcher—has a dramatically long tail.
4. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers tend to wander widely on their way to and from the wintering grounds, a habit they share with Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Tropical Kingbirds. During spring and fall they may show up almost anywhere in North America, as far north as British Columbia and Nova Scotia.

Notable Species: NONE