

FEATURED PHOTO

FIRST RECORD OF THE VARIEGATED FLYCATCHER FOR WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

STEVEN G. MLODINOW, Puget Sound Bird Observatory, 5501 17th Ave NE, Seattle, Washington 98105; SGMod@aol.com

DAVID S. IRONS, 2125 Hayes Street, Eugene, Oregon 97405; llsdirons@msn.com

Late in the afternoon of 6 September 2008, Mike and MerryLynn Denny found and photographed a bird in southeastern Washington that they suspected was a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*). The bird was along the Snake River at Windust Park, Franklin County, close to where we happened to be spending the night. The Dennys quickly posted news of their discovery to birding list-servers for Washington and Oregon, including links to photographs of the bird. We were able to view those photos from our hotel as well as to receive an e-mail from Charlie Wright outlining why the photographed bird was a Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*), not a Sulphur-bellied or a Piratic Flycatcher (*Legatus leucophaeus*).

We arrived at Windust Park at 07:00 on 7 September, shortly after sunrise, finding no other birders at the park. About 20 minutes later, we found the bird where it had last been seen the previous afternoon, in trees behind a house adjacent to the park. Beyond several trees reaching a height of approximately 15 meters, only disturbed grassland and lawn surrounded the house. For the first 20 to 30 minutes, when the sun angle was still low, the bird was flycatching from exposed branches about 5 meters above the ground in one of the taller trees. As the temperature rose, it began foraging from exposed branches nearer the tree's crown. It also came to the ground to drink from a puddle, less than 5 meters from us. About an hour later, it behaved oddly, perching for 10 minutes on the lip of a white bucket on an open lawn, allowing photographers to approach closely. By 09:00, approximately a dozen observers had gathered, and the bird moved into the more heavily wooded park, where it spent most of the remainder of the day. It was last seen back near the house at sunset.

The characteristics distinguishing this bird from the Sulphur-bellied and Piratic Flycatchers were readily apparent. It was distinctly smaller than a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher and too large for a Piratic: it was noticeably larger than nearby House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) and obviously smaller than nearby American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*). Its size was more akin to that of a Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), although it seemed a bit larger than that species. Its bill was moderately stout, larger than that of a Piratic Flycatcher but distinctly smaller than that of a Sulphur-bellied (see photos on this issue's back cover). Its extensively rusty tail (see top photo on back cover) was more typical of the Sulphur-bellied and Variegated Flycatchers, but some immature Piratic Flycatchers show substantial rust on the tail (J. V. Remsen pers. comm.). The rusty rump with large dusky streaks, however, was a trait not seen in the Piratic. Finally, the solidly dark crown and auriculars combined with a more diffuse malar stripe (see bottom photo on back cover) were consistent with the Variegated Flycatcher and eliminated the other two species. Two other species also deserve mention: the Streaked Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*) and Crowned Slaty Flycatcher (*Griseotyrannus aurantioatrocristatus*). The Streaked Flycatcher was eliminated by the same marks that ruled out the Sulphur-bellied. Juvenile Crowned Slaty Flycatchers bear some resemblance to the Variegated Flycatcher but lack the Variegated's densely streaked underparts and malar stripe and have unstreaked upperparts (Schulenberg et al. 2008).

The Variegated Flycatcher inhabits most of South America east of the Andes, where it occupies a variety of habitats from humid forest canopy to shrubby clearings

FEATURED PHOTO

with scattered trees (AOU 1998, Hilty 2003). *Empidonomus varius* consists of two subspecies, the more northern *E. v. rufinus* and the more southern *E. v. varius*, which is migratory and winters north to Colombia, Venezuela, the Guianas, and rarely Trinidad during the austral winter (AOU 1998). Austral migrants are present in Venezuela mostly from mid-March to mid-September and Colombia from March to August (Hilty and Brown 1986, Hilty 2003).

Prior to its appearance in southeastern Washington, the Variegated Flycatcher had been recorded only three times north of the range described above (A.O.U. 1998, Pranty et al. 2008): Biddeford Pool, York County, Maine, 5–11 November 1977 (Abbott and Finch 1978), near Reelfoot Lake, Obion County, Tennessee, 13–15 May 1984 (Nicholson and Steadman 1988), and at Toronto, Ontario, 7 October–6 November 1993 (Houle and Houle 1993). Note that a bird reported as a Variegated Flycatcher on Garden Key, Dry Tortugas, Florida, 15 March 1991 (Bradbury 1992) later proved to be a Piratic Flycatcher (Pranty et al. 2008).

Empidonomus v. rufinus differs from nominate *varius* “by inferior size; smaller bill; paler (brownish rather than blackish) spotting above, with the margins of the feathers lighter olivaceous; and less pronounced, also more restricted streaking underneath” (Hellmayr 1927:113); “streaking below more clouded, less distinct than in *varius*” (Hilty and Brown 1986:517). None of the Variegated Flycatchers in North America have been identified to race (B. Pranty pers. comm.). Recent study by T. Chesser (in litt.) of specimens of *varius* and *rufinus* confirms the validity of these marks and finds that *varius* is longer winged. There is overlap in bill length and wing length, however, enough so that these characters cannot be used to identify a bird from a photograph; also, evaluation of underpart streaking and back color are highly dependent on lighting (see this issue’s back cover and Figure 1), making identification based on photos difficult. The photographs of the Washington Variegated Flycatcher suggest that it is *varius*, largely on the basis of the extent of streaking below, but are not diagnostic (T. Chesser in litt.).

We suspect that the migratory race, *varius*, is the more likely to reach North America, paralleling the pattern of vagrancy of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*). Most records of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher from the United States and Canada are of the highly migratory subspecies of southern South America, *T. s. savana*, rather than the Middle American *T. s. monachus* (McCaskie and Patten 1994). Presumably, as with *T. s. savana*, the fall (austral spring) records of the Variegated Flycatcher in North America represent birds that spent the austral winter in their usual range but then migrated north rather than south with the onset of the austral spring.

The Variegated Flycatcher in Washington was a first-year bird, as evidenced by a juvenile outer rectrix (see Figure 1). It also has a worn tertial (see bottom photo on back cover), suggesting retained juvenile plumage. The great majority of Fork-tailed Flycatchers found in the United States and Canada have also been first-year birds (McCaskie and Patten 1994).

The Variegated, Sulphur-bellied, Piratic, Streaked, and Crowned Slaty Flycatchers all have populations that are highly migratory. The Sulphur-bellied breeds north to southeastern Arizona, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas (AOU 1998). The Piratic breeds nearly as far north, reaching San Luis Potosí and Veracruz, but in Mexico its breeding range is limited to the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre Oriental (AOU 1998). The Sulphur-bellied has wandered as far northeast as southern Ontario, 28 September–1 October 1986 (James 1991), and New Brunswick, 14–15 October 1990 (Christie et al. 2004). Northward vagrancy of the Sulphur-bellied in western North America is relatively infrequent, with no records from Oregon and Washington and only 15 for California, north to Humboldt County, all but one of which are for September and October (Hamilton et al. 2007, Glover et al. 2007). The Piratic Flycatcher has been recorded north of Mexico seven times, with six records from New Mexico or Texas and one from Florida (Pranty et al. 2008). Four of these records are for September

FEATURED PHOTO



Figure 1. Variegated Flycatcher at Windust Park, Franklin County, Washington, on 7 September 2008. Note the juvenile outer rectrix projecting outward.

and October, three for March and April (Pranty et al. 2008). The Streaked Flycatcher is a migratory species that ranges from northeastern Mexico to Argentina (Howell and Webb 1995), and the Crowned Slaty Flycatcher is an austral migrant that breeds south of the Amazon River from eastern Brazil and northern Bolivia to central Argentina and Uruguay and winters north to southern Venezuela and Colombia (Hilty 2003). The Streaked Flycatcher has yet to be recorded north of Mexico, but a Crowned Slaty Flycatcher was collected in Cameron Parish, Louisiana, on 3 June 2008 (Conover and Myers 2009).

The discovery of a Variegated Flycatcher in Washington serves as a good reminder that when a vagrant could be one of several related species or subspecies, the one breeding the nearest is not necessarily the most likely. For instance, note that at latitudes of 42° N or higher, the Variegated Flycatcher has been recorded more often than the Sulphur-bellied.

We thank Mike and MerryLynn Denny not only for finding this spectacular bird but also for promptly placing photos of it on the Internet. Many thanks to Charlie Wright for rapidly providing its identification, and to J. V. Remsen and Alvaro Jaramillo for furnishing further input on identification and for reviewing and improving the manuscript. Terry Chesser was generous in sharing his knowledge of the Variegated

FEATURED PHOTO

Flycatcher's subspecies. We greatly appreciate Bill Pranty allowing us access to the most recent American Birding Association Checklist before its publication, and we also owe a debt of thanks to Peter Pyle and Dennis Paulson for their input on this bird's molt state and age, and to Buford Myers and Paul Conover for informing us of the Crowned Slaty Flycatcher in Louisiana.

LITERATURE CITED

- Abbott, D. J., and Finch, D. W. 1978. First Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*) record for the United States. *Am. Birds* 32:161–163
- American Ornithologists' Union. 1998. Check-list of North American Birds, 7th ed. Am. Ornithol. Union, Lawrence, KS.
- Bradbury, R. C. 1992. First Florida record of Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*) at Garden Key, Dry Tortugas. *Florida Field Nat.* 20:42–44.
- Christie, D. S., Dalzell, D. E., David, M., Doiron, R., Gibson, D. G., Lushington, M. H., Pearce, P. A., Tingley, S. I., and Wilson, J. 2004. Birds of New Brunswick: An annotated list. New Brunswick Mus., St. John, NB.
- Conover, P. E., and Myers, B. M. 2009. First United States record of Crowned Slaty Flycatcher (*Empidonomus aurantioatrocristatus*) from Louisiana. *N. Am. Birds* 62(4): in press.
- Glover, S. A., Pandolfino, E., Terrill, S. B., and Rogers, M. M. 2007. Northern California region. *N. Am. Birds* 62:144–149.
- Hamilton, R. A., Patten, M. A., and Erickson, R. A., eds. 2007. Rare Birds of California. W. Field Ornithol., Camarillo, CA.
- Hellmayr, C. E. 1927. Catalogue of the birds of the Americas and the adjacent islands. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist Zool. Ser.* 13 (5).
- Hilty, S. L. 2003. Birds of Venezuela, 2nd ed. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Hilty, S. L., and Brown, W. L. 1986. A Guide to the Birds of Colombia. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Houle, D., and Houle, J. 1993. First record of Variegated Flycatcher for Canada. *Birders' Journal* 2:291–300.
- Howell, S. N. G., and Webb, S. 1995. A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, England.
- James, R. D. 1991. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario, 2nd ed. Royal Ontario Mus., Toronto.
- Jaramillo, A. 2003. Birds of Chile. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ.
- McCaskie, G., and Patten, M. A. 1994. Status of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) in the United States. *W. Birds* 25:113–127.
- Nicholson, C. P., and Steadman, S. J. 1988. The official list of Tennessee birds, addendum I. *Migrant* 59:14.
- Pranty, B., Dunn, J. L., Heinel, S. C., Kratter, A. W., Lehman, P. E., Lockwood, M. W., Mactavish, B., and Zimmer, K. J. 2008. ABA Checklist: Birds of the ABA Checklist Area. Am. Birding Assoc., Colorado Springs, CO.
- Schulenberg, T. S., Lane, D. F., O'Neill, J. P., and Stotz, D. F. 2008. Field identification of juvenile *Empidonomus* tyrants. *Neotropical Birding* 3:31–36.