



The Hart Beat



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Great Crested Flycatchers are the only flycatchers that breed in Florida, but you may see others in the winter.

FLORIDA'S WINTER FLYCATCHERS

Florida is many things to many people: the warm weather wonderland away from the icy, nasty north; the obligatory short term destination to annually visit grand-parents; the reality relief, relaxation resort of the Magic Kingdom; the grand golf vacationland where high handicappers can grapple with gators for lake bound golf balls; the state where the Supreme Court of the United States decides presidential elections rather than the voters; and for birders, the state where batches of birds can be added to personal bird lists in expectation they will one day be adopted by bird list committees as acceptable to be added to "Life Lists," i.e. birds in the life list "bank."

What Florida is not, is the place to go to look for flycatchers. And yet, in most winters, any or all, of the eight flycatcher species featured in this article can be found at some place or other, somewhere in Florida, even though only one of them is a common breeder in the state, and year round south Florida resident.

Yes, the one and only breeding flycatcher of Florida is the Great Crested Flycatcher (*right*). While not a common, see it in every



back yard bird, like the Northern Mockingbird, it can still be found almost anywhere in the state in the summer, and south Florida in the winter. It is a shy, cavity nesting bird, and in the photo shown here at a nesting box, I was

photographing the bird on the roof and was not even aware of the mate at the hole until I viewed the shot that night on the computer. Serendipity!



Of the three "look alike" winter Florida flycatchers, the Great Crested, the Ash-throated (*left*), and the Brown-crested (*below, right*), - the Great Crested has the brightest yellow belly and breast, with an all reddish tail extending to the tip. It also has a brownish lower mandible on the bill. The Brown-crested, a summer only resident of the south-western United States and year round resident of Central and South America, looks most like the Great Crested, but is much paler on the breast and belly, and the tail is not as rufous-orange as the Great Crested tail. The Ash-throated, another southwestern United States bird, is slightly smaller than the other two, and has a smaller, all black bill, and black at the ends of its rufous tail feathers. As its name would indicate, it has more extensive pale gray at the throat and upper breast. All three have different calls, which sometimes may be the best way to distinguish them. The Ash-throated, like the Great Crested, is also a cavity nester, while the Brown-crested is not.



The La Sagra's Flycatcher (*left*), like those already mentioned, is a myiarchus flycatcher and

thus, all four are closely related. A native of Cuba, the Bahamas and other northern Caribbean islands, it is slightly smaller than the other three, completely pale on the underside, and does not have any rufous in the tail feathers. It seems to show up somewhere in south Florida every year. The bird shown here spent a winter at Green Cay Wetlands in Boynton Beach and was seen by many on a St Lucie Audubon field trip.



The Least Flycatcher (*right*) is supposed to be a regular winter resident of Florida, but I have only seen one a couple of times in all the over twenty winters I have spent in Florida. The one depicted here was found and photographed on Carlton Road just south of St Lucie County's Paleo Hammock Preserve. It is the only empidonax flycatcher found in Florida at any time of year, which is fortunate for Florida birders, as empidonax flycatcher species are so similar that if they are not vocalizing, they can be almost impossible to tell apart. And they don't usually vocalize in the winter.

Two of the Florida winter flycatchers have very long tails and are quite showy. The Scissors-tailed Flycatcher (*below, left*) and Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*below, right*) are both members of the tyrannusgenus, and while Scissors-tailed are summer residents of Texas and Oklahoma, Fork-tailed are vagrants anywhere in the United States as their range is in Mexico and Central America. Scissors-tailed show up regularly in winter on Route 70 in St Lucie County, and are even more frequent visitors in Hendry County around STA-5. Fork-tailed are much rarer, as this



one was photographed in Highlands County, Florida, although Jewel and I found our life Fork-tailed in Maryland many years ago.

Arguably the most colorful of the Florida winter flycatchers is the Vermilion

(bottom, left), which for several winters has wintered at Orlando Wetlands Park, and another pair in the Everglades National Park. Another bird of the southwestern states, Mexico and South America, it has become a regular visitor to Florida in the winter. However, we can hardly call it a snow bird. (Unfortunately, when photographing a bird we can't always tell it where to pose, so barbed wire it is.)

So if you come to Florida in the winter for one or more of its many attractive features, you may want to consider checking to see what



flycatchers are being found. Presidential vote counts come only once every four years; flycatchers are here every winter. (All photos here, taken in Florida, except the nest box shot, which was on our property in Pennsylvania.) (1/1/15)

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