



least flycatcher



## Flycatchers

The tyrant flycatchers, Family Tyrannidae, are found only in the New World. The family name stems from the aggressive, almost tyrannical, behavior of some of the birds in this large group of more than 400 species, most of which live in the tropics. Pennsylvania has 10 regularly observed species. Flycatchers are often hard to identify, even for veteran birdwatchers; since the birds are often drab (the sexes are colored alike) and tend to stay among thick foliage, they are more easily distinguished by their vocalizations. Flycatchers are perching birds, members of Order Passeriformes, whose feet have three toes pointing forward and one toe pointing backward, letting them perch easily on branches.

Flycatchers catch and eat flies and many other insects, particularly flying ants, bees, and wasps. In forested areas large flycatchers may specialize in larger insects, medium-sized flycatchers may take slightly smaller prey, and small flycatchers may zero in on the smallest insects. Such feeding stratification reduces competition and lets several species use the same area. Flycatchers also forage somewhat differently, some hawking their insect prey mid-air while others glean their prey from vegetation. Also, different species prefer subtly different habitats, with varying amounts and densities of undergrowth and degrees of canopy shading.

When foraging, a flycatcher sits upright on a perch, scanning its surroundings while waiting for an insect to approach. The bird darts out in swift, maneuverable flight, snatches an insect out of the air or from vegetation with its beak, and eats it on the spot or returns to a perch to eat the meal. Several adaptations help a flycatcher catch insects. Its drab plumage makes the waiting bird hard to see (not just by its prey, but also by hawks that hunt for flycatchers and other small birds). The bill is flat and wide, suggesting somewhat the bills of swallows and nightjars, although not nearly so compressed or gaping. Bristles at the corner of the mouth may function as

“feelers,” letting a flycatcher make last-second adjustments before snapping its bill shut on prey. Keen eyesight lets a flycatcher spot insects and judge distances accurately. In addition to catching insects on the wing, flycatchers sometimes hover near foliage and pick off insects and spiders clinging to the vegetation. Some species land and catch prey on the ground. Most of Pennsylvania’s flycatchers occasionally eat berries and seeds.

Of the state’s nine breeding species, most build open cup nests anchored to small branches of trees and shrubs. One, the yellow bellied flycatcher, builds an enclosed nest on the ground. The familiar eastern phoebe plasters its nest against a rock wall or on a building rafter. And the great crested flycatcher uses a tree cavity. In most cases, the female does

most or all of the incubating, while the male defends the nesting territory and helps feed the young.

Flycatchers advertise their home territories using their voices; some employ a special “dawn song” given just before sunrise and rarely sing later in the day. Because many flycatchers are so similar in appearance, individuals probably recognize their own species by sound. There is evidence that the distinctive vocalizations of each species are innate, unlike most other birds, which learn to sing by listening to adults of their kind.

As insect eaters, flycatchers must vacate northern breeding areas in winter. They migrate at night. The various species winter in open and forested habitats along the Gulf Coast, on the Caribbean Islands, and in Central and South America. In South America, an estimated 10 percent of all birds belong to the tyrant flycatcher family. In much of their wintering range, flycatchers are vulnerable to habitat loss and fragmentation as large forested tracts are logged or converted to agriculture.

### Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus cooperi*)

Although once fairly common in Pennsylvania, this species has not been confirmed nesting in the state for more than 80 years. Its white throat and breast contrast with dark olive sides. A fairly large (7 to 8 inches long), big-headed flycatcher, the olive-sided inhabits cool coniferous forests, generally near water. The male sounds a repetitive *pip-pip-pip*, plus a song that has been rendered as *hic-three-beers*. Individuals sit high in dead snags or branches, sally forth to catch prey (mainly wasps, winged ants, and bees) and return to the perch to eat. Olive-sided flycatchers place their cup-shaped nests in trees 5 to 70 feet above the ground, among dense twigs or needles; three young are usual. The main breeding range is in Canada. The species migrates north through Pennsylvania as late as mid-June and leaves again in mid-August, to winter in the rainforests of South America. This long-range migration, tendency to sit erectly in the open, and its assertive demeanor has earned it the nickname “peregrine of flycatchers.”

### eastern wood-pewee



### Eastern Wood-pewee (*Contopus virens*)

The eastern wood-pewee breeds throughout eastern North America from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. It is found in all counties in Pennsylvania. To locate this drab, olive-gray, sparrow-size bird, listen for the male’s namesake call—*pee-o-wee*—which is given throughout the day but particularly at dawn and dusk. Pewees use almost every woodland habitat, including woodlots, woods edges, mature forests (both deciduous and mixed), parks, and urban areas with shade trees. They perch in one place for an extended period, flying out to snag passing insects; one study found an average perching height of 35 feet above the ground. Pewees eat flies, beetles, small wasps, and moths. They also consume elderberries, blackberries, and fruits of dogwood and pokeweed.

Males defend breeding territories of 2 to 6 acres. Pairs begin nesting in late May. The nest is a compact cup woven of plant matter, hairs, and spider silk; its outer surfaces studded with lichens; it looks like a larger version of the ruby throated hummingbird’s nest. The three eggs are incubated by the female and hatch after 12 or 13 days. Both parents feed the young, who make their first flights at 14 to 18 days. Blue jays are major predators, taking both eggs and young. Most perching birds stop singing regularly in late summer, but male wood-pewees keep up their chanting until the autumn migration. The species departs from Penn’s Woods in August and September, with a few individuals hanging on until October. Wood-pewees winter in the tropics from Panama to Bolivia, in shrubby woods and along forest edges.

### Yellow-bellied, Acadian, Alder, Willow, and Least flycatchers

These small, feisty flycatchers (around 5 inches in length) have olive-colored backs and heads, pale breasts, and pale eye rings and wingbars. They spend much of the day hunting from a perch. When sitting, they occasionally flip their tails up and down. Unlike pewees and phoebes, *Empidonax* flycatchers generally catch their prey by sallying to vegetation and gleaning the insect from a branch or leaf. So, *Empidonax* flycatchers are associated with well-vegetated habitats. Extremely difficult to identify in the field, they are usually distinguished by voice and habitat.

### Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*)

The yellow-bellied flycatcher lives in the deep shade of coniferous woods and cold bogs. A shy and extremely rare nesting bird in Pennsylvania, it inhabits remote conifer forests and wetlands in a scattering of Pennsylvania’s northern counties. The male’s advertising song is a brief *killik* or *che-bunk* while its contact call is a quiet, ascending *chu-wee*, similar to the calls of the eastern wood-pewee. The cup-shaped nest is built of roots and mosses and is hidden on or near the ground, in a cavity among the roots of a fallen tree,

in a hummock of sphagnum moss, or at the base of a conifer or fern clump. The species nests mainly in Canada, as far west as central Alaska, with all individuals apparently migrating through the East. Yellow-bellied flycatchers winter in the forests of Middle America from northeastern Mexico south into Panama.

### **The Acadian Flycatcher** (*Empidonax virescens*)

The Acadian flycatcher nests mainly in the Southeast. Pennsylvania is near the northern limit of its range. The type, or first, example of the species was discovered near Philadelphia in 1807 by the Scottish-born ornithologist Alexander Wilson who is considered the father of American ornithology. The species is misnamed, since it does not inhabit Acadia, the former French colony centered on Nova Scotia. The Acadian flycatcher lives in moist woods near streams and requires large areas of contiguous forest. The male sounds a low, sharp *spit-chee!*

The Acadian often chooses a beech tree in which to build its frail, hammock-like nest. Stems and grasses dangle from the nest, giving it an unkempt appearance. In the northern part of their range, they are strongly associated with hemlock trees. Acadian flycatchers winter in the rainforests of Central America and northwestern South America, where they sometimes follow mass movements of army ants and prey on insects set to flight by the creeping columns.

### **Alder Flycatcher** (*Empidonax alnorum*) & **Willow Flycatcher** (*Empidonax traillii*)

The alder flycatcher and the willow flycatcher were, until the 1970s, considered to be one species: Traill's flycatcher (named by John James Audubon for Dr. Thomas Traill, one of his supporters). However, the two species have different voices, use slightly different habitats, build different kinds of nests, and are reproductively isolated. The alder sings burry descending *fe-bay-o* and the willow sneezy, ascending *fitz-bew*. The call notes also are different with the alder flycatchers keeping contact with a low, flat *pip* call while willow flycatcher's contact call is a bright upslurred *wit*. Both species will sing and call after dusk. The alder builds a loose cup nest, usually within a few feet of the ground, while the willow flycatcher's nest is compact and woven of fine materials, and often built higher above ground. Both alder and willow flycatchers nest in thickets of willows, alders, and other shrubs, but the willow flycatcher tends to use drier, more open areas than the alder flycatcher. In Pennsylvania, alder flycatchers nest mainly in the north and at higher elevations, while willow flycatchers nest statewide, with the fewest records coming from the northcentral region. The willow flycatcher is often associated with old fields and riparian shrubs while alder flycatchers are more strongly associated with wetlands and timbered areas at higher elevations.

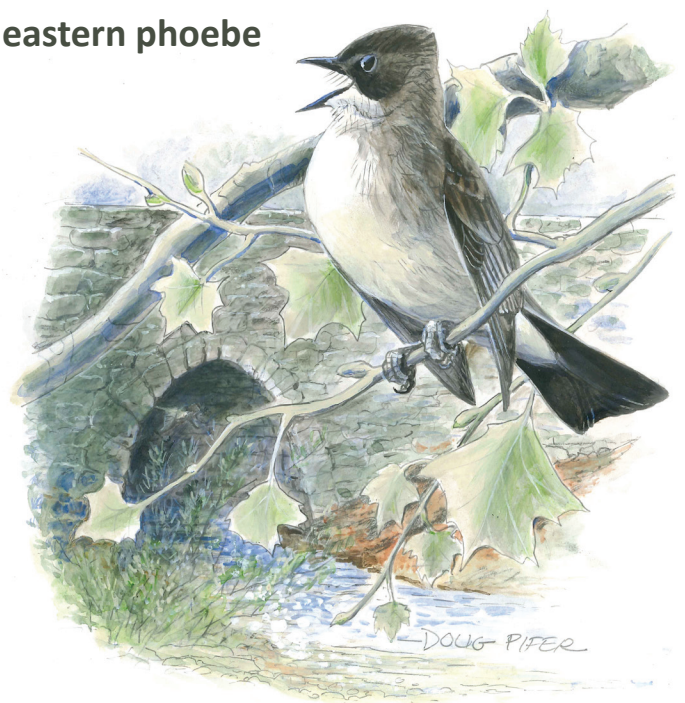
### **Least Flycatcher** (*Empidonax minimus*)

The least flycatcher is the smallest of the eastern *Empidonax* flycatchers and probably the most common. It lives along woodland edges and often perches in the open. The male calls out an emphatic *chebeck!*, accented on the second syllable and repeated incessantly. The pair keeps contact with a *wit* call note. The least flycatcher eats small wasps, winged ants, midges, flies, beetles, caterpillars, grasshoppers, spiders, and berries. The species sometimes nests in loose colonies with many acres of good habitat surrounding the cluster unoccupied. The nest, a neat cup, is usually placed in a vertical fork of a branch in a small tree or sapling. The three to five eggs are incubated for 13 to 15 days. The least flycatcher's breeding range stretches from western Canada to Nova Scotia and south in the Appalachians to Tennessee and North Carolina. The least flycatcher is fairly common across much of Pennsylvania, except for the southeast, where it is absent. In autumn, adults migrate ahead of juveniles to wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America.

### **Eastern Phoebe** (*Sayornis phoebe*)

In the old days, this familiar barnyard and yard bird was commonly called "bridge peewee" for one of its favorite haunts. Anyone who has spent time at a woodland cabin or farmhouse has probably come to know this jaunty medium size (6.5 to 7 inches) flycatcher. This gray-brown flycatcher is very plain in appearance with no coloring or plumage features like wingbars or eye-rings, but they make up for plain plumage with an engaging personality. They can be very familiar with humans, sitting close to homes and other buildings. Phoebes breed statewide in Pennsylvania, except in heavily urbanized

#### **eastern phoebe**



areas. They eat a variety of insects, including small wasps, bees, beetles, flies, and moths. They often take prey from vegetation and from the ground, and they eat seeds and berries. The female builds a nest out of mud, moss, leaves, grass, and hair, tucking the cup-shaped structure into a sheltered spot beneath a rock ledge, against a stone wall, on a bridge beam or barn or porch support. A pair may use the same nest several years in a row.

The eastern phoebe is the hardiest of Pennsylvania's tyrant flycatchers, arriving on their northern nesting ground in March. They are truly an appropriate harbinger of spring since they are entirely insectivorous, feeding almost exclusively on flying insects.

They announce themselves with repeated *fee-bee* calls and their characteristic up-and-down tail flicking.

The female lays four or five eggs and incubates them for around 16 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, which fledge

## great crested flycatcher



some 16 days after hatching. Eastern phoebes typically rear two broods per summer. They often nest within a few feet of American robins, and each species tolerates the other's presence; perhaps there is little overlap in the foods they eat. In the Northeast, populations have risen since settlement, with phoebes taking advantage of nest sites created by human construction. The species winters in the Gulf states and Mexico with a few lingering in the North each winter in protected areas.

## Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitis*)

Pennsylvania's largest (8 to 9 inches) flycatcher, the great crested, sports a yellow belly, a gray breast, and rusty red tail and wing feathers. When agitated, individuals erect a head crest. The species breeds in mature woods throughout Pennsylvania and eastern North America and can also be found in wooded suburbs, farm woodlots, and orchards. Great crested flycatchers feed among the treetops, hopping from limb to limb and snapping up caterpillars, katydids, crickets, beetles, and spiders, and by flapping out into openings and clearings to take moths, butterflies, beetles, bees, and wasps. In late summer and fall, many wild fruits are eaten.

The call is a loud, insistent *wheep!* Great crested flycatchers defend their territories against intrusions by squirrels and other birds. They nest in tree cavities, including old woodpecker holes, as well as hollow fenceposts and artificial nesting boxes. (One nest was even found in the barrel of a cannon in Gettysburg National Military Park.) Both male and female bring in grass, weeds, bark strips, rootlets, and feathers, often building up this cushion as high as the entry hole. They have the curious habit of placing a shed snakeskin or scrap of cellophane among the nest material; some ornithologists speculate that the crinkly foreign matter may deter nest predators. This cavity-nesting bird will use a nest box placed in a wooded area. Great crested flycatchers depart from Pennsylvania in September en route to wintering grounds in southern Florida and from Mexico to Colombia.

## Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*)

This bold, aggressive flycatcher breeds in open country across North America. Look for kingbirds in scattered trees along roads and streams, orchards, fencerows, and forest clearings. The bird gets its name because it dominates other birds, including many larger than itself, driving them away from its territory. Of all the flycatchers, kingbirds are among the easiest to locate and observe. They are about 8 inches long and are dark gray and white, with a white-tipped tail and a small red streak on the head. Roger Tory Peterson describes the species' call as "a rapid sputter of nervous bickering notes." Kingbirds feed on beetles, wasps, bees, winged ants, grasshoppers, honeybees, and many other insects.

Kingbirds often attack crows, hawks, and owls, flying high in the air, getting above the larger birds, and diving at them repeatedly. After driving off an adversary, a kingbird may perform a display known as "tumble flight," in which it glides

back to the earth in stages, sometimes tumbling in midair. After mating, the female does not let the male help her build the nest and may actually drive him away until after the eggs hatch. The nest is a bulky cup 7 to 30 feet up in a shrub, tree, or snag. The two to five eggs hatch after 16 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, which can fly after around 17 days; they may be fed by their parents for a month after fledging, with family members sounding rapid *kitterkitter* calls back and forth. Kingbirds have a very different lifestyle on their wintering range in South America, where they coexist in flocks and switch to a diet of berries.



**eastern kingbird**