

Least Flycatcher

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Record Number: 90-39

16 Dec 1990

Classification: A-D

Red Rock Res., Marion Co., IA

Ann Johnson, T. Schantz

photos; through 12/18; IBL 61, 49,50,58, 62:22, Johnson 1992

DOCUMENTATIONS

Ann Johnson

Tim Schantz

PHOTOGRAPHS

Tim Schantz, P-0396

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:49, 50, 58

Records Committee: IBL 62:22

Johnson, A. 1992. An incredibly late Least Flycatcher. IBL 62:59-61.

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA (as Least, but accepting as species)

NA: I would accept this bird as emp. Species, but not as Least. Emp. flycatchers are so highly variable that I would not myself try to separate a winter plumage bird without I heard its full call (che beck!).

A-D: Excellent descriptions which (at least by my research with Kaufman and the empidonax series in BIRDING) are pretty safely conclusive for Least Flycatcher. The photos help but are not alone diagnostic.

A-D: I don't believe the photographs (which do clearly show an empidonax flycatcher) will stand on their own to support an identification of Least Flycatcher. However, I am convinced by the exhaustive documentation that this is an accurate identification.

A-D: From a review of recent American Birds field reports, there is no precedent whatsoever for any Empidonax showing up in the upper Midwest in winter. However, we do have a well described Empidonax that seems to have done just that.

Not to drop names, but I recall being on a pelagic trip with the late Jim Lane, and he went through an exhaustive monologue on how to visually separate fall Empidonax flycatchers. About all that I recall was his fervid conviction that it COULD be done-something that I had doubted until that time.

Ann and Tim were correct in considering all Empids, including Western species. At this time of year, there is probably as great a possibility of a Western stray as an extremely late typical migrant. Nevertheless, I feel Ann's very thorough documentataion points to Least Flycatcher. Also, I agree that comparison of the reported field marks with Kaufman's chart (Advanced Birding) eliminates other possibilities.

A-D: The picture appears to show an adult least with more yellow and olive than most individuals would have. The white wing bars set off by the black wing, and the eye-ring are not as conspicuous as described by the observers. However, we only see two angles in the photos of this bird which was observed for a long time making false impressions very unlikely. The "whit" note heard by Schantz and the short primary extension eliminates

all the empidonax except Dusky and Gray according to Kaufman. The deeply contrasting wing bars, supported by the photos eliminate Dusky and Gray. the least is the only empidonax that matches all the criteria and is also the most likely to be found on a late date in Iowa. The black tip to the lower mandible described by Schantz was not seen by Johnson. The black tip could eliminate least if it was extensive and very dark, however a diffuse dark tip is present on many least according to Kaufman. In summary, we have good written documentation of a bird that was studied at length, two photos, a described call note, and a known vagrancy pattern which all support Least Flycatcher.

A-D: ADVANCED BIRDING has good comparison information on the Empidonax genus. Another good source for them is also the series, "The Empidonax Challenge: Looking at Empidonax", Part I through V in issues of BIRDING, August-December 1985, June-December 1986, and October 1987. All field marks are consistent with Least Flycatcher. Combination of color of upper surface, lower surface, lower mandible and white wing covert, tertial feather edging, short primary extension very good for Least. The "whit" call note heard by Schantz puts the record beyond reasonable doubt for Least Flycatcher. There was no discussion on bill shape or how extensive (1/4, 1/3, 1/2) the dark tip on the lower mandible was. Was white eye-ring same width all the way around the eye? What was the plumage condition? All of these points would have made the record easier to evaluate. Photos not clear enough to help take this record to A-P even under 30X loupe magnification.

A-D: The good plumage descriptions by Ann and Tim and the call note that was heard along with Kenn Kaufman's Empidonax section in ADVANCED BIRDING and Keven Zimmer's THE WESTERN BIRD WATCHER all point to this bird being a Least Flycatcher. Ann did a great job on "similar species and how they were eliminated"!

REVOTE: 7 A-D

A-D: I'm not convinced by comments of previous NA reviewer. Identification as Least seems very reasonable and well supported.

A-D: I am completely satisfied with this documentation and the identification as Least Flycatcher.

A-D: NA reviewer seems to make the assumption that similar appearing Empids cannot be separated except by voice. I think currently available information shows otherwise. Ann and Tim have used this information along with their own experience to correctly identify this bird.

A-D: I would agree with the NA comments if this bird had only been briefly studied, but we have two experienced birders who studied the bird at will. Because the field marks as a whole strongly point to Least Flycatcher (see the six A-D's comments on original review) and the known Iowa vagrancy pattern show Least to be the latest empid migrant I think this bird should be labeled a Least. Some birders (Gary A. Rosenberg's Arizona Records Committee) evidently adhere to a 95% probability rule for acceptance of vagrants. In my view this bird easily meets that criteria.

A-D: I suggest the NA reviewer read the articles listed by

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other reviewers. They are excellent and say that this bird can be separated as to species based on the information contained in these articles. This record should be accepted as a Least Flycatcher.

A-D: I feel this is a good Least Flycatcher record.

Swamp Sparrow: Midwinter reports were from southerly locations only: singles were at L. Manawa 20 Jan (BPa, LPa) and L. Ahquabi S.P. 2 Feb (JSi).

White-throated Sparrow: This species was well-distributed in the state this winter (see CBC data). Unusual so far north in midwinter were 4 on 2-16 Feb in Mason City (CuN, RGo).

White-crowned Sparrow: See CBC data. Rather surprisingly, none were reported in midwinter.

Harris' Sparrow: One was far to the east near Burlington 25 Jan (CRF). Spring movement was detected in Ida Co. 29 Feb (PE).

Lapland Longspur: Some large flocks were seen in the northwest this winter: 900 were s. of Matlock in Sioux Co. 19 Dec (DCH); 500 were in Osceola Co. 21 Feb (LAS), and 300 were in Sioux Co. 26 Feb (JV). At the opposite corner of the state numbers were also good: 50-75 wintered in the Green Bay bottoms in Des Moines Co. (CRF).

Snow Bunting: As with longspurs, the best counts were from the northwest. In Dickinson Co. 300 was the largest, with many seen throughout the period. About 250 were in Cerro Gordo Co. in January (CuN). The only report from s. of I-80 were up to 8 apparently wintering at Red Rock Res. (MPr, THK).

Red-winged Blackbird: Midwinter numbers were low, with no reports received prior to 20 Feb, when the only sizeable flock reported occurred at L. Manawa, where 500 were seen (BPa, LPa). They were "all over" by 26 Feb, at least in Jefferson Co. (DCP). No major blackbird roosts were detected in the state this winter.

Eastern Meadowlark: A probable spring migrant was singing at Runnells 29 Feb (THK), and 2 were reported from Glenwood 7 Feb (DLR) by a known Eastern Meadowlark identifier but with no details. This species apparently winters in very low numbers across the southern edge of Iowa and along the Mississippi R. valley in the southeast (see CBCs).

Western Meadowlark: The expected wintering species statewide, a few were identified by song or call, such as 15 near Iowa City 28 Jan (THK).

meadowlark sp.: No counts of meadowlarks were received. Two were in Cerro Gordo Co. 29 Jan (JLW) for a northerly midwinter record, and the first spring birds arrived in Ida Co. 28 Feb (PE).

Rusty Blackbird: No midwinter reports were received.

Brewer's Blackbird: The only reports were from CBCs.

Common Grackle: A few wintered as far north as Sioux Co. (JV) and Cerro Gordo Co. (JLW).

Brown-headed Cowbird: See CBC data. None were reported in midwinter.

Pine Grosbeak: No reports, either from CBC or winter period.

Purple Finch: Few wintered; they were "sparse" at a Jefferson Co. feeder (DCP), and at another feeder in the same county numbers were the lowest since 1987-88 (CAA).

House Finch: This species is now common throughout the state.

Red Crossbill: None were found after the CBC period, during which 14 birds were seen on three CBC counts. The only other report was of 1 earlier in the period at the Durbin feeder in Linn Co. 9 Dec (JLF).

White-winged Crossbill: Not unlike the preceding species, only 1 white-wing was found in midwinter, at the West Branch feeder of Sally Erickson 25 Jan (JLF). Possibly the same bird was at another West Branch feeder, that of Midge Appleby, 25 Feb (JLF). The lone CBC bird was at Cedar Rapids, but others seen earlier during the period were a female at a Cass Co. feeder 1-9 Dec (DoR) and 1 in an Ida Grove pine grove 9 Dec (PE).

Common Redpoll: While not an invasion, a fair number of redpolls entered Iowa this winter. Good numbers penetrated well south, such as the 75 at Rathbun 26 Jan (TNJ) and 35 in Linn Co. 15 Feb (DLD). See CBC data. The latest record for the period was of 3 at Iowa City 16 Feb (RPi). Did the spring-like February weather send these birds back north?

Pine Siskin: Another poor year for this species. The best count was at Davenport where 20-30 were at a feeder all winter; 28 were banded 20 Feb (PCP). A few others were at feeders, but no other observer reported more than 6, these at Iowa City through the period (RPi).

Evening Grosbeak: None were reported on CBCs or during the winter period.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow: This species is well-established n. of Burlington, at least as a wintering population. Up to 50 were seen during the winter (CRF). See also CBC data.

OBSERVERS

Carol Ann Alexander (CAA), Fairfield; Brian Blevins (BBI), Davenport; Tanya E. Bray (TEB), Bellevue, NE; Dennis Carter (DC), Decorah; Robert I. Cecil (RIC), Des Moines; Raymond L. Cummins (RLC), Centerville; David L. Dankert (DLD), Cedar

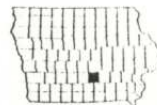
Rapids; James J. Dinsmore (JJD), Ames; Stephen J. Dinsmore (SJD), Raleigh, NC; David Edwards (DEd), Ames; Bery Engebretsen (BE), Des Moines; Peter Erzen (PE), Ida Grove; Charles R. Fuller (CRF), Burlington; James L. Fuller (JLF), Iowa City; Rita A. Goranson (RGo), Mason City; Douglas C. Harr (DCH), Larchwood; Bill F. Huser (BFH), South Sioux City, NE; Ann M. Johnson (AMJ), Norwalk; Thomas N. Johnson (TNJ), Centerville; Matthew C. Kenne (MCK), Algona; Thomas H. Kent (THK), Iowa City; Sharon R. Laub (SRL), Rippey; Curt Nelson (CuN), Mason City; Barbara Padelford (BPa), Bellevue, NE; Loren Padelford (LPa), Bellevue, NE; Peter C. Petersen (PCP), Davenport; Randall Pinkston (RPi), Iowa City; Don Poggensee (DPo), Ida Grove; Diane C. Porter (DCP), Fairfield; Mark Proescholdt (MPr), Liscomb; Douglas L. Rose (DLR), Glenwood; Donna Rourick (DoR), Atlantic; Lee A. Schoenewe (LAS), Spencer; W. Ross Silcock (WRS), Tabor; Jim Sinclair (JSi), Indianola; John Van Dyk (JV), Sioux Center; Jan L. Walter (JLW), Mason City; Gerald White (GeW), Muscatine; Barbara L. Wilson (BLW), Hastings.

Box 300, Tabor, IA 51563

AN INCREDIBLY LATE LEAST FLYCATCHER

ANN JOHNSON

The Red Rock Christmas Bird Count is always a time of anticipation for me. Some years the ice, snow, and cold north winds make the morning pass slowly and demand most birding be done by car. Other years have brought us nearly springtime weather with warm, southerly breezes. Because the weather had been remarkably mild and the lake remained free of ice, 16 December 1990 looked particularly promising. Tim Schantz and I had spent every available opportunity in the past week scouting and preparing for the count, fully believing that this may well be the year to break the Red Rock record for species. Neither of us could have guessed what the "bird of the day" would be.



Roy Godwin of Indianola joined me for his first CBC. We enjoyed the walk on Whitebreast Beach where there were a number of Snow Buntings. A first-winter Thayer's Gull gave us a good show and comparison with young herrings. We spent a short amount of time trying to find owls in some of the evergreens near the Whitebreast campground with no luck. I remembered a few cedars near the parking lot of the Stu Kuyper trails near there, and in a last-ditch effort to find a Northern Saw-whet Owl, we decided to check the area in the few minutes before lunch.

The woods were silent as we emerged from the car and headed toward the trailhead. A small bird with a strong white eye ring flew from a tree branch to a brush pile in front of us. I remarked to Roy that we just might have a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, not unprecedented but an excellent CBC bird. On further inspection it was obviously larger than a kinglet and had a longer, wider bill. It was certainly an Empidonax flycatcher. The bold eye ring and white wing bars were suggestive of a Least Flycatcher, a bird which should have left for the tropics long ago. The bird flew from perch to perch as we studied it, seemingly catching insects close to the top of the grass.

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The eye ring was white and bold, and completely encircled the eye. The bill was smallish and had a dark upper mandible and a yellow-orange lower mandible. The head and face were dark gray, and the back and rump were olive. The wings were dark with two distinct white wing bars and showed very little primary projection. The tail was dark and not particularly long. The underparts consisted of a dirty white throat and a clear gray breast with no markings or wash. The belly and undertail coverts, however, had a very noticeable yellow wash. When perched, the bird habitually flicked its tail and wings. We watched it for about 15 minutes as it snatched insects near the ground in the tall grass.

After dictating an initial description, we headed for the visitor center to compile the morning counts. Our report of an *Empidonax* flycatcher was met with a considerable amount of skepticism, if not downright disbelief. After lunch, Tim and Jim Sinclair headed for Whitebreast with Roy and me not far behind. Schantz and Sinclair found the bird with very little effort and heard it utter a "whit". Tim was able to get close enough for a few photos which would identify the bird as *Empidonax* species. In sorting through all of the characteristics, we all came to the conclusion that this was not a vagrant western empid but in all likelihood an incredibly late Least Flycatcher.

The identification of *Empidonax* flycatchers requires studying and assessing as many characteristics as possible. Bill shape and size varies considerably among the different species, but it is difficult to assess in the field unless the bird is directly overhead. Of the identifying marks we could see, the combination of short primary projection, bold white eye ring, strongly contrasting white wing bars, back color, clear rather than vested breast, and bill color and pattern indicated this bird could be identified as a Least Flycatcher. The call note heard by Schantz and Sinclair added evidence to this decision.

The next night, Tim called me with the news that a Pacific-slope Flycatcher had been identified in Pennsylvania. I retrieved my documentation, and we again discussed all the details. The possibility of a vagrant western species was raising some self-doubt about our identification, so Tim decided to go back early the next morning to double check our identification. Luckily the ice storm blanketing Iowa that morning was moving slowly enough that Tim could again observe the bird and confirm our earlier details. We assume the flycatcher succumbed to the weather shortly thereafter.

Our identification was based on the best available information. The chart and information in Kaufman's book (1990) were most helpful. One difficulty we encountered was a lack of detailed information on molt sequences since most flycatchers leave North America before mid-December. The bright white wing bars and eye ring would indicate an adult bird. Pre-basic molt in adult Least Flycatchers, however, should occur on the wintering grounds and fall birds would show wear on the flight feathers (Pyle et al. 1989). Although we never had the bird in the hand to be certain of feather condition, the perceived lack of feather wear suggests that the molt occurred in North America, surely a most unusual happening.

Empidonax flycatchers winter in the tropics where insects, their primary diet, are plentiful. Interestingly enough, some empids, including the Least Flycatcher, supplement their diet with berries and seeds (Ehrlich et al. 1988). If this bird had been in the area around the first of December when there was a heavy snowfall, this supplemental food supply would help explain its survival.

Because *Empidonax* flycatchers are so difficult to identify to species, there is a tendency to identify them just to genus. With the latest record for an empid in Iowa being 16 October (Dinsmore et al. 1984) however, it behooved us to try to identify it to species. The influx of good identification information over the past several years

proved to be extremely helpful. Improved optics now allow for clearer and more detailed observations. Techniques used heretofore exclusively by banders, such as length of primary projection are now used in field identification. As always in difficult identification situations, not all birds may be safely identified. In this particular case, however, we had seen many field marks and heard the bird call. Tim's extensive experience with western empids increased our collective confidence. After consideration of the difficulties in identifying *Empidonax* species, the Records Committee accepted the written documentation as a Least Flycatcher - a phenomenal and unprecedented Iowa Christmas Bird Count record.

LITERATURE CITED

- Dinsmore, J. J., T. H. Kent, D. Koenig, P. C. Petersen, and D. M. Roosa. 1984. Iowa Birds. Iowa State University Press, Ames. 356 p.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. The Birder's Handbook. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York. 785 p.
- Kaufman, K. 1990. Advanced Birding. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 299 p.
- Pyle, P., S. N. G., Howell, R. P. Yumick, and D. F. DeSante. 1987. Identification Guide to North American Passerines. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA. 278 p.

532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

I.O.U. BUSINESS

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Saturday, 7 December 1991, North Elk Rock State Park, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

Members present: Ann Barker (presiding), Bob Cecil, Pam Allen, Eloise Armstrong, Diane Porter, Mark Proescholdt, Harold White. Others present: Jim Dinsmore, Ann Johnson, Tom Kent.

Reports

Minutes for the 13 September 1991 meeting were approved as distributed with two corrections (motion by Allen, seconded by Cecil).

Treasurers report: Allen reported that 1992 dues are being paid at a good rate. The fall meeting had excess revenues of \$78:25. Allen asked for a clarification of allocation of Big Day contributions. Minutes from the spring 1987 Board of Directors meeting stated that proceeds were to be 75% to the endowment fund and 25% to I.O.U. projects, with expenses to be paid from the general fund. It was moved (Allen, seconded by White) to allocate Big Day revenues as follows: 75% to the endowment fund and 25% to special projects fund (which will replace the Birdathon fund); and to pay committee expenses from the general fund. Motion carried. This will be effective with the 1992 calendar year.

Records: At its September meeting, the committee chose Tom Kent as its new Secretary. Kent reported that former Secretary Carl Bendorf has finished the 1989 report and is completing the 1990 report.

The committee has finished the first round of review of winter and spring 1991 records. It has compiled a new official checklist which will be published in the next issue of *Iowa Bird Life*. Kent asked for clarification of responsibility for production and distribution of the field checklist. It was moved (Porter, seconded by Allen) that the Treasurer be responsible for printing, selling, and financial record keeping of the field checklist. The motion was amended (Armstrong, seconded by White) to include all other I.O.U. materials. The amendment passed, and the amended motion passed.

Kent also asked for clarification of responsibility for archiving field reports, documentations, and photographs. Dinsmore was reassured recently that the Iowa State University Library is willing to continue to act as the official repository for I.O.U. materials. Duplicates of all materials sent to the library must be kept for the Records Committee's use. After discussion, the board agreed to

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DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Least Flycatcher

Location: Whitebreast Recreation Area, Red Rock Reservoir, Marion Co., IA

Habitat: Primarily open edge and grassy area with pine tree plantings

Date: 16 December 1990

Time: 11:40 to 11:55 a.m. and
approximately 1:30 to 2:00 p.m.

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: Roy Godwin, Indianola; Jim Sinclair, Indianola, Tim Schantz,
Knoxville (photos)

Description of bird: I first saw the bird as it flushed from a tree branch to a brush pile and thought it was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet as the white eye-ring was very noticeable. On further inspection it was obviously larger than a kinglet and had a longer, wider bill. The bird was Empidonax flycatcher size. The eye-ring was white, complete, and fairly wide and bold. The bill was smallish and had a dark upper mandible but a yellow-orange lower mandible. The head and face were dark gray, the back and rump were olive in good light but looked grayer in the afternoon when the lighting was not as intense. The wings were dark with two distinct white wingbars and showed very little primary projection. The tail was dark and not particularly long. The underparts consisted of a dirty white throat and the breast was clear gray with no markings or wash, but there was a very noticeable yellow wash to the belly and undertail coverts. The bird did a lot of upward tail flicking and a considerable amount of wing flicking. It was fairly active both times I observed it and stayed within three feet of the ground as it fed in typical flycatcher fashion. Presumably what insects were available were in the grasses, which led to speculation of how this bird survived the snows of two weeks ago.

Similar species and how eliminated: Body and bill shape and behavior identified this bird as a flycatcher. The size, eye-ring and wing bars eliminated all but Empidonax flycatchers. Because of the late date on this bird, it is difficult to get an understanding of molt sequences which may or may not be helpful. From what I can find on molts, however, the following is based on best available information.

Empids eliminated by-

Willow/Alder complex - bold eye-ring, sharply contrasting wing bars, short primary projection

Yellow-bellied - broad eye-ring, grayish-white throat, no yellow cast to either eye-ring or wing bars, olive to gray cast to back

Acadian - short primary projection, white wing bars, olive to gray cast to back, likelihood of this late date

Western complex - strongly contrasting white wing bars, eye-ring was not noticeably elongated, grayish-white throat

Hammond's - short primary extension, sharply contrasting wing bars, entire lower mandible appeared light, clear breast with no "vested" look, contrast between face and throat

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Dusky - no dark tip to lower mandible, sharply contrasting wing bars, contrast between head and back

Gray - strong eye-ring, sharply contrasting wing bars, no dark tip to lower mandible

Buff-breasted - !! no buff on breast, short primary extension, olive coloration on back in good light

Perhaps the simplest way to compare is by using the chart in Kaufman's Advanced Birding, pp. 208-211. Only the Least has all of the characteristics observed. Least would also be the most logical late straggler by virtue of its known migration dates.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? Everyone agreed that it was an *Empidonax* Sp. with leanings toward a Least Flycatcher; ruling out of vagrant western species was biggest concern, but everyone seemed to be in agreement in the end.

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): The sky was primarily overcast although it varied in brightness as indicated in color perceptions. The bird was observed through 7x26 binoculars at distances as close as 25 feet.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have many years of experience with eastern Empids and a considerable amount of experience in sorting through western species. My comfort level in identifying some non-calling Empids has been increasing in the past couple of years.

References and persons consulted before writing description: NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America was consulted immediately after first observation; Audubon Master Guide to Birding, Zimmer's Western Bird Watcher, Pyle's Identification Guide to North American Passerines, and Kaufman's Advanced Birding were all consulted prior to writing the documentation.

How long before field notes made? Basic description dictated immediately after first observation How long before this form completed? Documentation written a few hours later

Rare Bird Report

SPECIES- Least Flycatcher (Empidonax minimus)

LOCATION- Sty Kyper Trailhead and nearby pine grove, Whitebreast Recreation Area, Red Rock Reservoir, Marion County, Iowa

DATE- 16 and 18 December 1990

TIME- 1:32pm to 2:10pm on the 16th and 3:00pm to 3:20pm on the 18th

DESCRIPTION- Small empidonax flycatcher. Fairly bold white, complete eyering. Small bill with a dark upper mandible. Lower mandible yellow-orange with a dark tip. Back and rump olive-gray. Head and face gray. Throat and breast were clear gray. Yellow wash on the belly and undertail coverts. Whigs dark with two bold heavily contrasting wing bars. Very short primary projection. Did a lot of simultaneous wing and tail flicking. Gave a single sharp "whit" note, usually from a perch within four feet of the ground. Very active!

DISCUSSION- At the compilation of the Christmas Bird Count Ann Johnson had indicated that Roy Godwin and herself found a good candidate for the "Bird-of-the-day". A possible Least Flycatcher near the Stu Kyper Trailhead. Jim Sinclair and myself were searching the area when Jim relocated the bird in the nearby pine grove. We were soon joined by Roy Godwin and Ann Johnson and we all did a sweep in which we were awarded with good views. I managed to get off a few photos. Later on the 18th I relocated the bird by its call in the grove. I have had much experience with banding and doing wing formulas on Empidonax Flycatchers on the SE Farallon Islands as well as much field experience with Flycatchers. I agree with Ann Johnson and Roy Godwin's initial identification.

NOTE- Please keep the enclosed photos.

Tim Schantz
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