

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers Are Arriving in Texas

Of all the Neotropical migrants that pass through Texas, the lovely scissor-tailed flycatcher is probably the most welcome of all. Few birds have the appeal of this charismatic flycatcher. It not only is one of our most beautiful and gregarious birds, but it seems to prefer a relationship with humans, nesting on utility poles and in trees often surprisingly close to our homes and other structures. Its amazing courtship flights and continuous singing tend to give it an additional appeal. It therefore is often called the "Texas bird of paradise." And its arrival in our area is a sure sign that the new season has begun.

The long-tail, brighter males arrive first with the shorter-tailed females appearing a few days later. By then the males have already established territories and are chasing competitors away from preferred sites. But when the ladies arrive, the males will take on a very different persona, performing some amazing courtship flights, ascending to more than 100 feet before sailing back, often with outstanding aerobatics. These dramatic flights include up and down flying, much zigzagging, and even reverse somersaults, usually at great speeds, and with tail flowing and fluttering and wings out to display their salmon-colored underwing linings. All the while he is performing he will be giving cackling-snapping calls. She often will join in the fun. Scissor-tails also give a unique dawn song on their breeding grounds that includes a series of loud stuttered "pup" notes that conclude with an emphatic "perlep" or "peroo."

Like all flycatchers, the scissor-tail's diet is principally insects, at least during their nesting season. Although most insects are captured in flight, scissor-tails will also take insects on the ground, perhaps more often than most flycatchers. Grasshoppers are a significant part of their diet. After nesting and on their wintering grounds, however, they will also consume berries.

Although paired scissor-tails are generally loners, as soon as the youngsters are fledged they will usually join other family groups. In some cases these flocks can include up to 200 individuals. And unlike most other members of the flycatcher family that usually are quite after nesting, scissor-tails continue calling until they leave for their wintering grounds in September or October, throughout their migration, and also on their wintering grounds. These flocks often congregate at choice sites. And 100 or more scissor-tailed flycatchers can create quite a racket.

Many Texans think of this bird as their "state bird" instead of the mockingbird, which is the official state bird. That undoubtedly is because of the charisma of this long-tailed songbird, and also perhaps because the mockingbird is so commonplace. While mockingbirds are full-time residents throughout most of the state, leaving only the far northern portions of the state in winter, scissor-tailed flycatchers normally are present only from March through October. But during that period they can be found in all but Far West Texas, where they occur only occasionally.

By November the vast majority of the summer residents and migrants passing through the state from Oklahoma, Kansas, and southeastern New Mexico have gone south. Recent records, however, suggest that lone birds may remain in South Texas all winter. The rest migrant south to central Mexico and into Panama. There they occur in huge flocks, utilizing open grasslands, pastures and fields.

But by March they are with us again. Few songbirds are as well loved and admired as our lovely scissor-tailed flycatcher.