



**Text by  
Forrest Rowland**

The cover of this issue of *Birding* not only shows five *Empidonax* flycatchers photographed with skill, it is also direct evidence of how much has been made possible by digital photography. If only all of our looks at *Empidonax* flycatchers were so easy! And they're sitting

right next to each other for direct comparison. Birders in the field rarely come across different species of *Empidonax* flycatchers in direct comparison, as here. Does this mean we should disregard photographic practice materials as unreasonable? Absolutely not.

In the bygone era of film, hesitation was the watchword of the day. First and foremost, there are only so many exposures on one roll of film. Photographers snapped shots sparingly. Most of us were simply taking “record shots,” hoping that one of the 24 to 36 chances we had would turn out. More often than not, the resulting stills ended up in a shoebox in a closet or garage. But now we can shoot away. While this practice is perhaps frowned upon by some Old School professional photographers, it is inarguably the best way to get useful results.

Consider the difficulty of the subject, as well. *Empidonax* flycatchers spend much of their time perched. That is a good thing! However, they frequently perch in areas with poor lighting, in vegetation that obstructs our view, and/or at angles that don't necessarily allow for easy identification using plumage and soft-part field marks. The most common view is from behind, often slightly above or below eye-level, and at a distance somewhere between 30 and 100 feet, generally speaking. Not horrible, but definitely not optimal. With Photoshop and other production tools of the digital trade, we are able to recover a lot of detail that we miss in the field.

Before the digital age, it was difficult to get good images, period—not to mention *enough* images of the subject for adequate study. These past conundrums and difficulties helped great field birders to recognize the value of *structural identification cues*, which can be noted from various angles, regardless of lighting and other variables that sometimes lead us astray. Combining these identification techniques with study of photographic evidence, we achieve a level of understanding about *Empidonax* flycatcher identification that was not possible for 20th-century birders.

We must still be careful to recognize that, although our photos are getting better, birds are not exactly evolving into

less-confusing forms. The variability of individual plumage characteristics and the overlap of these characteristics between species has not diminished just because we are now able to pick up on details and minutiae that went unnoticed before. Birders are simply better equipped to locate, recognize, and relate those details into working examples of how we can learn through technology.

Now to the subject at hand—the cover images. Many of you, upon receiving your March 2009 *Birding*, put yourselves straight to the task of identifying the five species on the cover. Let's take a look at them now. I actually didn't know before what they were, so let's take a look at how I've approached the identification process.

**Upper Left**



The first thing I notice is the bird's crest and overall greenish appearance. Focusing on the head, I see that the bill is of moderate length. The angle doesn't allow a good assessment of width. Given that the bill is not particularly long, I assume that the crested effect is real. Next: the “teardrop” shape of the eye-ring and the yellow throat. All these factors make me lean toward one of the two or more species in the “Western” Flycatcher complex—Cordilleran, Pacific-slope, and perhaps the population on the Channel Islands.

But what about Yellow-bellied Flycatcher? The Yellow-bellied and “Western” Flycatchers are sister taxa (that is, they are each other's closest relatives), and they share many traits in common. Well, the primary extension of this bird is too short—shorter than even for the average “Western” Flycatcher. Yellow-bellied Flycatchers average longer in the primaries than either Cordilleran or Pacific-slope Flycatchers by a notable margin. Yellow-bellied Flycatcher can safely be discounted at this point.

Narrowing this bird down to species is treacherous. It always is, without vocalizations. This particular bird does show an especially short primary projection, suggesting Pacific-slope over Cordilleran. Again, without vocalizations, all I can offer is a suggestion.

**Upper Right**



This bird is similar in plumage and pattern to the “Western” Flycatcher I just discussed, but the primary projection is much longer. So I'm thinking Yellow-bellied. If anything, this individual's primary projection falls on the long side of the average for Yellow-bellied. Note also the round-headed appearance of this individual. A rounded head is characteristic of Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. This bird fits all the structur-

al and plumage characteristics of Yellow-bellied, which is what I will call it.



### Center

Just to be clear, the enormous bird in the middle of the cover is not to scale. I'm glad this bird is quite large in the image, because that allows us a better look at what I refer to in my article as a "mid-value" species and individual. That is to say, it is a bird that does not show a particularly long or short bill, a particularly long or short tail, or a particularly long or short primary projection. These mid-value individuals can be the hardest of all.

Although the bill of this bird is not particularly long, the head has a slightly crested appearance. As I note in my article, the appearance of a crest is something that correlates with a long bill. So I'm guessing we can rule out such short-billed species as Least, Dusky, and Hammond's. The primary projection of this bird is shorter than one would expect for Hammond's and Acadian Flycatchers, but definitely longer than one would normally see on Dusky and Gray Flycatchers. However, we can't yet rule out Least Flycatcher, which can overlap with the two remaining species I'm thinking—Alder and Willow. Although the primary projection is of medium length, the tail nonetheless looks fairly long. This is good for both Willow and Alder Flycatchers, especially Alder.

Is it a Least? Well, the primary projection on this individual borders on the long side for Least, as does the tail. And there is the matter of plumage. In particular, note the thin eye-ring; the eye-ring of Least is usually more prominent. I'm definitely leaning toward Alder or Willow.

Can we say if it's Willow or Alder? That's a tough call, and it's complicated by geographic variation in Willow. Characters that lean toward Alder include the stark contrast between the throat and cheek, along with the primary projection vs. tail length. And take another look at that eye-ring. It is nearly uniform and exceedingly thin all the way around; that's subtle, but it can be a good distinction from Willow, which usually shows a fainter, ill-defined eye-ring or none at all.



### Lower Right

Although the bird is in low light, it appears very similar to the bird in the center of the cover. So let's start off with the assumption that it is either an Alder or a Willow. Note that the primary projection is slightly shorter on this bird, and the head has a more crested appearance. The eye-ring is thin and uneven.

I am reluctant to assign this individual to species, but I guess I will have to go with Willow Flycatcher. The general

lack of contrast in the face and throat, the crested appearance, and lack of a definite eye-ring all aid in this assumption.



### Lower Left

This might be the most difficult of the birds on the cover. That's because of the posture of the bird, especially the drooped wing. Let's start with the bill. It is short. This individual is too short-billed to be a Gray, Acadian, Willow, or Alder Flycatcher. It's probably too short for Cordilleran, Pacific-slope, or Yellow-bellied, although that is not as certain. The contrastingly pale throat, the pale lores, the strong eye-ring, and the general lack of yellow in the upperparts and head bring us to Hammond's, Least, and Dusky Flycatchers. Now, let's look at the wing morphology. That is where this image may lead us astray. The primary projection is short for a Hammond's Flycatcher, and the tail appears very long, which would support the assumption of a short projection. This bird is not a Hammond's Flycatcher. It is a Least or Dusky Flycatcher. But which?

Overlap in primary projection lengths between Least and Dusky Flycatchers is common. Dusky, however, has a longer tail than Least. This measurement is enhanced in the field by the fact that Dusky Flycatcher averages a shorter primary projection than Least Flycatcher. Okay, but what do we do with the bird on the cover?

The wing that we can see is drooped and somewhat extended. A shame. This makes the primary projection appear a little longer than it may actually be. This could also make the tail look shorter than it really is. Trying to make a mental adjustment for this effect, I lean toward Least for this bird. Despite the tricky posture, the tail just isn't long enough for Dusky, and I would say that the primary projection is on the lengthy side for Dusky, as well. I humbly suggest that this bird is a Least Flycatcher, based on the image before us.

Given that these are great, close-up photos, it is spooky that the identification of these individuals could be disputed. And that is part of the beauty and mystique of *Empidonax* flycatchers—something that wins them a healthy amount of respect and a touch of fear from the birding community.

For anyone who has additional comments, disputes, or personal techniques they have learned for identifying this wonderful genus, please feel free to submit them to the comments section of the new ABA photo gallery <[gallery.aba.org/thumbnails.php?album=22](http://gallery.aba.org/thumbnails.php?album=22)>.