

Empidonax Flycatchers: the bane of birdwatchers or simply a misunderstood group?



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From Peterson 1941

About this presentation

- Given at the Calgary Field Naturalists' Bird Study Group in May 2013
- Had to remove pictures due to copyright concerns
- Plan on revising and updating the information, adding pictures and sounds as they become available

What is an *Empidonax* Flycatcher?

- All small songbirds with olive upper parts, pale throats and bellies, with whitish wing-bars and at times an eye-ring
- All extremely similar in plumage, therefore need other field marks to ID to species
- In Alberta, 7 species

The problem

- Extremely similar
- Many field marks
 - However few are 100%,
 - are hard to see or,
 - only applies to a bird in your hand
- Incorrect approach
 - Trying to identify non-singing bird on migration
- Correct approach
 - We will go over it

Keys to *Empidonax* identification

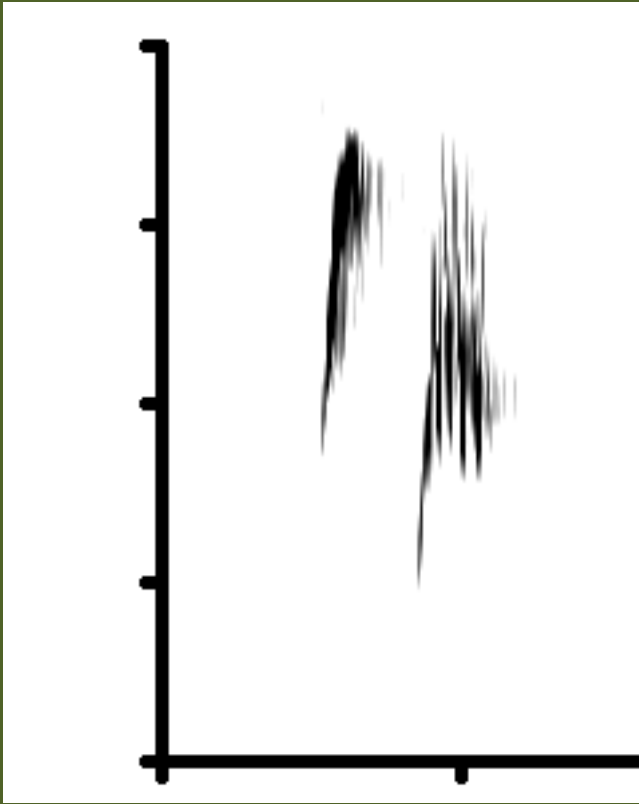
- While species look alike
- Can use other characteristics to narrow down field
- May lead to species ID
- These characteristics include:
 - Bill shape, mandible color
 - Habitat
 - Behavior
 - Shape of wingtip
 - **Vocalizations (most important clue)**



Least Flycatcher

- Small round-headed
- Bill short and wide
- Lower mandible:
orange-yellow
- Throat /breast: white
- Short primary extension
- Short tail
- Conspicuous eye-ring

Least Flycatcher



che-bek'

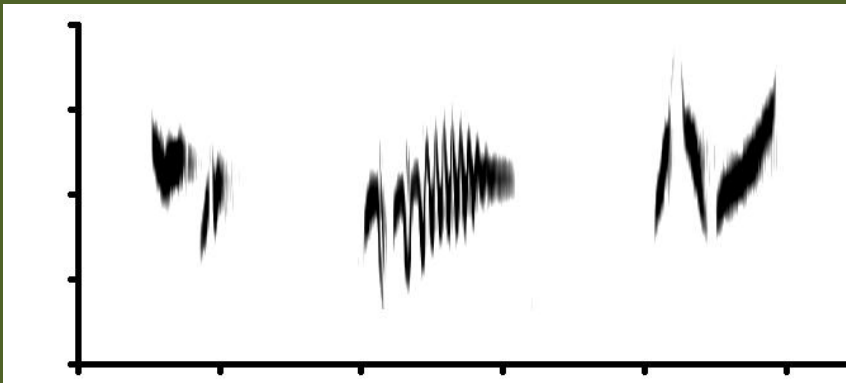
- Deciduous or mixed forest
- Vocalizations
 - Song: *che-bek'*
 - Call note: *'whit'*
- Locations in Alberta
 - Anywhere there is forest
 - All natural regions

Dusky Flycatcher

- Medium sized bird
- Narrow bill
- Medium tail
- Short primaries
- Lower mandible pale
- Drab bird
- Eye-ring not well defined

Dusky Flycatcher

- Open deciduous habitat
 - Foothills
- Vocalizations
 - Song: Three syllables
 - Can vary order of syllables
 - Call note: “whit”
- Locations in Alberta
 - Foothills
 - In Kananaskis Country
 - Barrier Lake
 - Cypress Hills



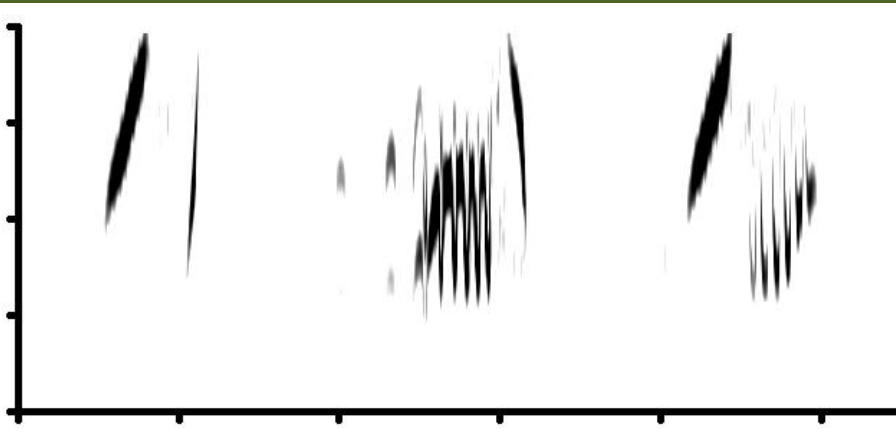
“shli-ip”, “ri-i-nk” “r-eet”

Hammond's Flycatcher

- Small bird
- Short tail
- Short bill
- Large head
- Compact
- Straight narrow bill
- $\frac{1}{2}$ bill dark, then yellow
- Conspicuous eye-ring

Hammond's Flycatcher

- Montane coniferous forests
- Vocalizations
 - Song three syllables
 - Typically same order of syllables
 - Call note “pip”
- Locations in Alberta
 - Banff (Muleshoe)
 - Rocky Mountain region
 - Local and uncommon



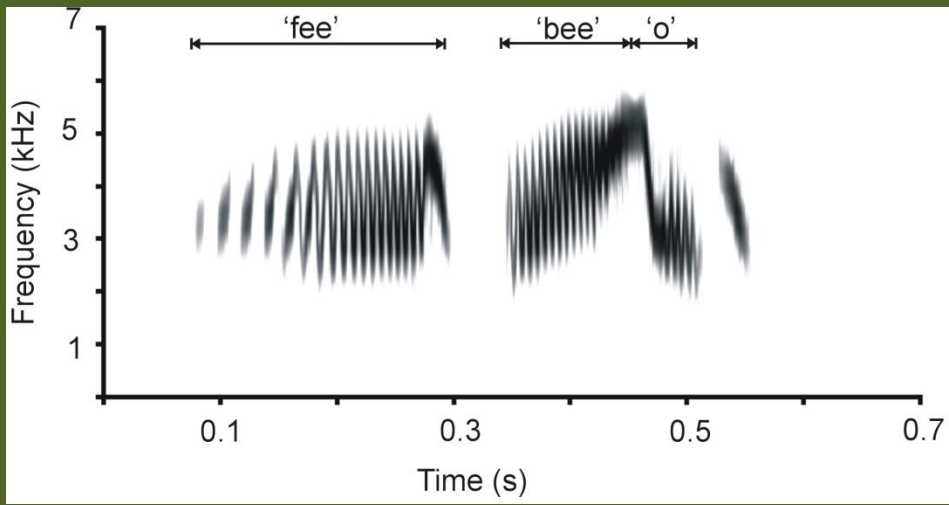
“se-put” “tsurrt”, “chu-lup”

Alder Flycatcher

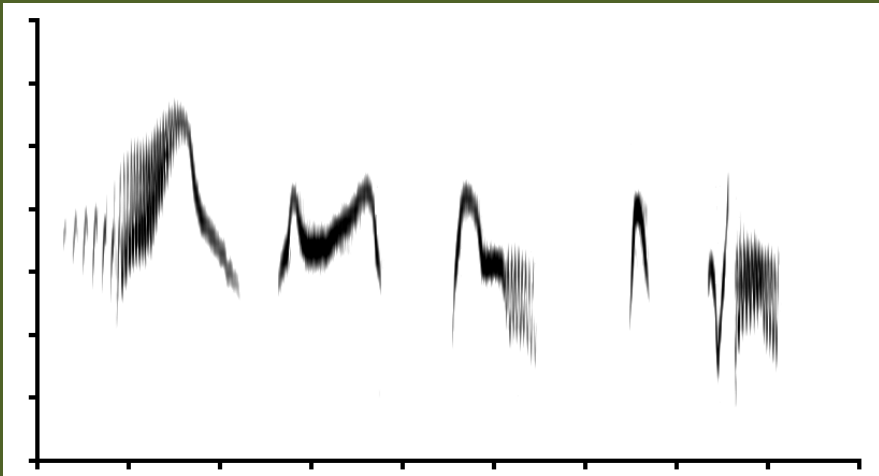
- Chunky bird
- Wide bill
- Lower mandible pale
- Long primaries
- White throat
- Variable eye-ring



Alder Flycatcher



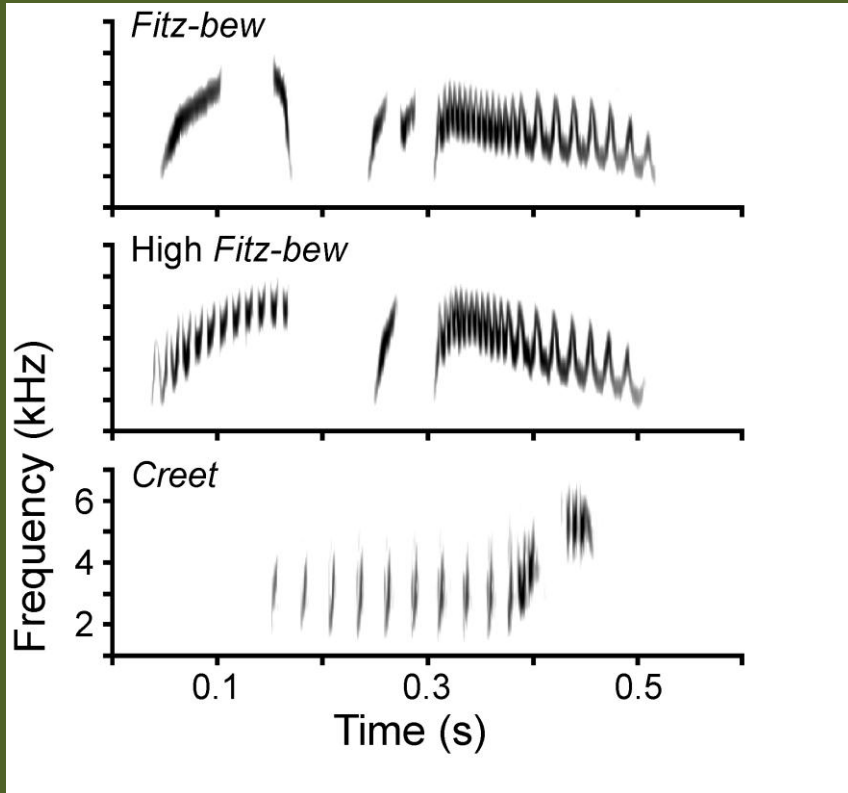
- Wet thickets
- Vocalizations
 - Song: 'fee-bee-o'
 - Call notes: 'pit'
- Locations in Alberta:
 - All regions except Grasslands
 - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
 - Bryant Creek
 - Common



Willow Flycatcher

- Robust bird
- Large, wide bill
- Large head
- Pale mandible
- Long primaries
- White throat
- No visible eye-ring

Willow Flycatcher



- Moist thickets
- Vocalizations
 - Song: 3 types
 - Call note: “whit”
- Locations in Alberta
 - Foothills
 - Limited distribution
 - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
 - Bryant Creek (nice to compare with Alders)
 - Sibbald Flats (only Willows)
 - Locally common

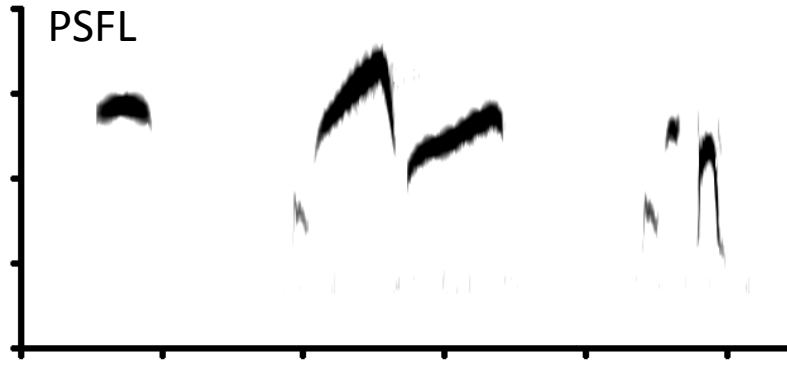
Willow vs. Alder flycatchers

- Habitat
 - Alders found in wetter habitat
 - Willows found in dryer habitat
 - HOWEVER situation is reversed in Alberta
- Song
 - Alder: 1 song type
 - Willow: 3 song types

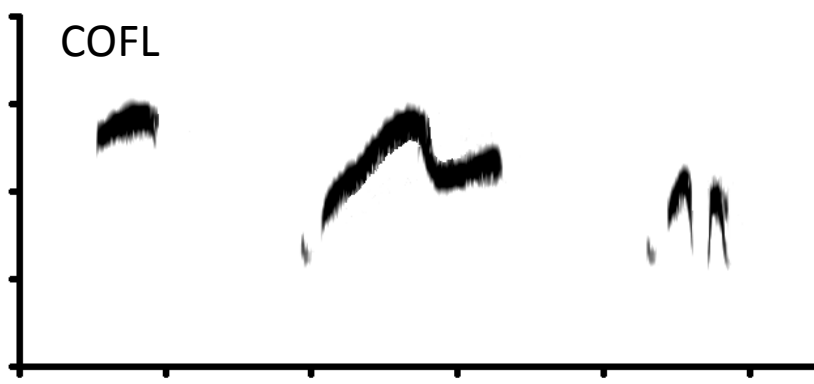
Pacific-slope / Cordilleran Flycatcher

- Small bird
- Long tail for body
- Yellowish feathers
- Bill wide
- Lower mandible yellow-orange
- Tear-drop shaped
eye-ring

Pacific-slope / Cordilleran Flycatcher



“seet ps-SEET ptsick”



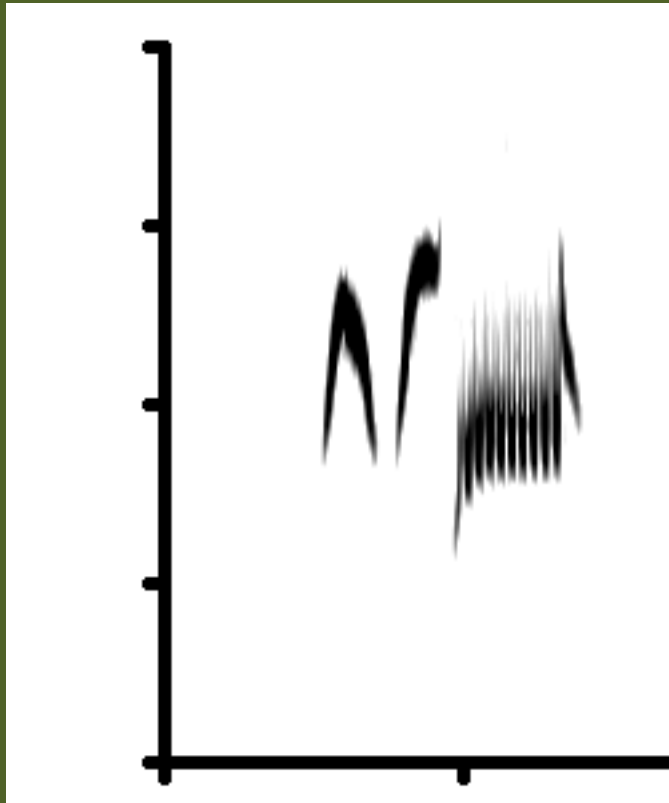
“seet ps-SEET ptsick”

- Coniferous forests, near streams
- Hybridize
 - Which do we have in Alberta?
 - More work needed
- Vocalizations:
 - Song(s): very similar
 - Position note: distinctive
- Locations in Alberta
 - Kananaskis (Hwy 68)
 - ~ 1 km W of Sibbald Meadows Pond
 - Bryant Creek (far south side)
 - Banff / Jasper

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

- Large headed
- Short-tailed bird
- Broad bill
- Lower mandible:
orange-yellow
- Conspicuous eye-ring

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher



che-bunk

- Wetlands, muskegs
- Vocalizations
 - Song: 1 song type
 - Call note: *'per-weee'*
- Locations in Alberta
 - Boreal Forest / Foothills
 - Cypress Hills, Grande Cache, Fort McMurray
 - Bragg Creek Provincial Park

Summary



Alder Flycatcher chicks

- *Empidonax* while challenging
 - Can be identified with practice
 - and of course a little patience
- Vocalizations are best clues
- Late May to early June
- Early in the morning,
 - enjoy the dawn chorus
- Good luck!
- Need additional information, feel free to email me

Directions to Sibbald Creek Trail (Hwy 68)

- From Calgary:
 - Head West on Hwy 1 (toward Banff)
 - Take exit 143 for AB-68 S toward Sibbald Creek Trail
 - At the stop sign at the bottom of the exit turn left
 - Proceed ~ 14 km to Bryant Creek (right side of road)
 - See Map on next slide for further details

Sibbald Creek Trail (Hwy 68)

