

First Illinois Record of Tropical/Couch's Kingbird

by Dan Kassebaum



Tropical/Couch's Kingbird. First Illinois Record, 3 June 1999, Maeystown Road, Monroe County. Photo by Jim Malone.

On 3 June 1999 I had finished the school year, turned in the grades where I teach, and decided to drive and bird the levees in Monroe County. Most of the county lies in the Mississippi River floodplain. The few towns in the county sit on the bluffs, and the rest is wetlands. I had nearly completed my four-hour levee birding route, which yielded many egrets and herons. While driving on the Maeystown Road to Waterloo, I observed a kingbird with a very bright yellow belly on a power-line over a sink-hole I hadn't planned on birding after school so I didn't have my scope. I was looking west into the late afternoon sun at a bird that was nearly impossible to identify by plumage. I expected a Western Kingbird, since this species has become quite regular for the area. Because I had seen so many Western Kingbirds in the past few years, I knew I was seeing one of the other "western type" kingbirds. The bird had a forked brownish tail rather than the black tail seen on Western Kingbird. This species had white edges to the outer tail feathers, which Western Kingbirds have. Dutifully,

I wrote my field notes; then headed for a telephone. I made several calls, but could not reach anyone. I finally thought of contacting Jim and Charlene Malone of St. Louis, Missouri. Battling work traffic, the Malones were able to make their way out of St. Louis to Monroe County only to find me but no kingbird. I had been away for more than an hour making phone calls. However, we weren't ready to give up. We drove up and down all the adjacent roads, scanned every tree top, and hoped for our bird to suddenly appear. After an hour and a half we decided to call off our search. We were packed and leaving; I was driving in the lead and continued to scan the lines when I saw the bird about a quarter mile from the original site. I waved at the Malones. The bird was now at the farm of Peter A. Weber of Waterloo. I noticed Peter at his house and asked permission to enter his field. He allowed us access to his property to photograph the bird. Jim Malone took some nice shots of this bird with his camera. The setting sun was our biggest enemy. We were run-

ning out of time. Unfortunately the most important part of the observation didn't materialize. The bird did not call. Not being too familiar with this U.S. border/Mexican species I was unaware how important this was. Had the bird sung, the kingbird's identity would have been revealed.

The Tropical Kingbird wanders as a far-flung vagrant compared with the sedentary Couch's Kingbird, so the bird I saw probably was an overmigrant Tropical Kingbird, but without a positive voice identification the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee has conservatively accepted this species to the state checklist as a Tropical/Couch's Kingbird. The color photographs taken by the Malones are being examined at the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, bird division staff and Mel Traylor, the ornithologist, whose study led to the splitting of these two species from Tropical into Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds (1979).

Mlodinow (1998) states the Tropical Kingbird status is "almost completely obfuscated by the Tropical-or-Couch's question." He notes there are about 40 eastern North America records of Tropical/Couch's Kingbirds from an era when these two species were considered conspecific; seven of these records have been identified as Tropical Kingbird and nine as Couch's Kingbird. The rest remain undetermined. Mlodinow lists the nearest Tropical Kingbird Middle-western record to Illinois for United States as an individual at Eagle Harbor, Keeweenaw County,