



Elaeniamania

By Aaron Gyllenhaal

The sun was shining, birds were singing, and the sky was a bright blue. It seemed like a great day for an afternoon stroll through the local park. I was with my dad, Eric, and my brother, Ethan, and we were doing just that in mid-April 2012. We were looking for birds at the park I monitor, right after school got out for the day. This park, Douglas Park, is in the middle of a rough neighborhood on the west side of Chicago, so nobody gives it a chance. Douglas Park is in fact a great birding place. The one thing that sets it aside is the marsh, which is a rare thing in this part of Chicago. We were looking for an American Bittern, which had been hanging around the marsh for the past couple days. After a short search, we flushed it from the same area as before and snapped a couple pictures, appreciating its presence.

When we started to walk around the edge of the marsh, Ethan noticed a bird flitting around in the willows. We thought it was an Empidonax-type flycatcher. Empidonax flycatchers are a group of flycatchers containing five species regularly seen in Illinois, and are notorious for being difficult to identify. They tend to arrive in early May, except for Least Flycatcher, which arrives one or two weeks before the others. This fact

made this bird most likely a Least Flycatcher. After our first good look, something seemed off. The behavior, molt pattern and overall coloration of this bird confused us. We slowly eliminated the species of Empidonax flycatchers one by one. Yellow-bellied Flycatchers are much more yellow. Acadian Flycatchers are greenish and they have a completely different body shape. Willow Flycatchers have a fairly close resemblance to our bird, but have an orange tip to the lower mandible, and so do Alder Flycatchers. After effectively eliminating other Empids, the bird flew away. We left it in peace and moved on, somewhat content with the answer of Least Flycatcher.

We finished birding Douglas Park and went home. I posted pictures of the flycatcher onto a forum for Illinois birding. One of my young birder friends, Nathan Goldberg, weighed in saying that the flycatcher looked like it could be an elaenia, a bird that would be thousands of miles away from its homeland of South or Central America. This reinstated my suspicions and caused me to look at my photos again. This time I noticed a white crown stripe in one of my photos. I responded to Nathan and asked for the opinion of others. Nothing. I was in suspense the whole

next day during school. After getting no responses for a whole day, I created a separate thread. This one focused on the ID of the flycatcher. Ethan posted his photos to this thread which included another photo of the crown stripe. Ethan posted the thread to Facebook. This caused the thread to spread like wildfire. One of the first responders was Greg Neise, the founder of the forum who was conveniently at an ABA meeting so he was surrounded by experts on this subject. He stated that it looked to be an elaenia. Some of the best birders in the country, Kenn Kaufman, Doug Stotz and Alvaro Jaramillo, independently responded by concurring that this bird was in fact an elaenia. Now, the debate was between Small-billed Elaenia and the Chilean subspecies of White-crested Elaenia. Small-billed would be a first ABA record, while White-crested would be a second as it was previously found in south Texas 9-10 February 2008. After experts seemed to agree on the fact better photos were needed to reach an absolute consensus, I went to bed.

We left early the next morning, just before sunrise, in hopes of finding the elaenia. My dad let me cut the first half of the school day, so I had about five hours to search for it. Birders descended on the park from all over