

Elaenia species.

**Oak Park, Cook
County. 21 April 2012.
Photos by Ken Koontz.**

**Note the central
white crown stripe
indicative of several
elaenia species. Also
note, the presence of
a third white wingbar.**



the Chicago area and beyond. Despite all of the eyes looking, we had no luck for the first five hours, but other birds were everywhere. A LeConte's Sparrow was the best find with a singing Sora taking second. Also seen were Wilson's Snipe, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and flocks of Double-crested Cormorants. Five hours after our arrival, I had some great new park birds but was convinced we would not refind the elaenia.

The second we got back to our car, ready to head back to school, I saw Joe Lill running across the front of the fieldhouse. I followed him and learned that Doug Stotz has just refound the elaenia! After a moment of relief, I searched ravenously for the elaenia, along with the few dozen birders remaining. It was found again in half an hour and we all saw it. The views were not anything conclusive beyond what we had previously seen. The elaenia flew into a large tree and sight was lost. It disappeared for a while, but other great birds popped up. Osprey and Merlin were the highlights.

Three hours later, the elaenia was refound northeast of where it had been. After everybody got it, it wandered north throughout the park. Great photos were obtained and I hoped that it could be identified to species. In

the evening, I watched as the thread erupted with various opinions from observers. This continued for another day. Even though my dad had to leave town, my mom was able to take us to Douglas Park on Saturday.

Saturday was not nearly as good of a birding day as Thursday. The only positive was the elaenia was less challenging to find. Other birds were almost non-existent. There was a crowd of birders from many states including California, Texas, Colorado, and North Carolina. The elaenia was seen the whole day on Saturday and Sunday, but when Monday came, it was nowhere to be found. With that, Elaeniamania drew to an end, as did the most memorable birding experience I have ever had.

No matter how many people tried, no absolute conclusion could be met between Small-billed and White-crested Elaenia. This bird's plumage was so worn, that it caused problems when trying to identify it. For example, Small-billed Elaenias have three wingbars while White-crested usually have two. Wear erased half of the wingbar on one side and faded it on the other, making this fieldmark inconclusive, as White-Crested can have a faded third wingbar. The white crest was either big for Small-billed

or small for White-crested. Most importantly, the bird never called. Calls are extremely important to flycatcher identification as they are almost always conclusive to species.

As a young birder, this is the type of find that you would only dream about. The fact that it was found in the park I monitor made the experience even more special.

The story of this bird was so compelling that CBS Evening News, National Public Radio, Chicago newspapers, and websites across the world all picked up this story.

Editor's Note: Both White-crested and Small-billed Elaenias have very large South American ranges with the White-crested breeding throughout much of the Andes in both the northern and southern portions of these mountains in South America, with some races wintering over a large portion of the rest of South America during the austral winter. Small-billed breeds in the southern portion of South America and also disperses widely, northward over much of northern South American during the austral winter.

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