

Illinois' first Fork-tailed Flycatcher

with a discussion of spring and inland occurrences of the species in the United States and Canada

by Joshua I. Engel



On 16 May, 2005, I was wandering through the prairie at Paul Douglas Forest Preserve (Hoffman Estates, northwest Cook County) looking for grassland sparrows, scouting for an upcoming big day, when a striking bird with an extremely long forked tail flew up from in front of me. It landed about seven meters away on a tall blade of grass. I took one look at it through my binoculars and reached for my cell phone to spread the news: I had just found Illinois' long-awaited first Fork-tailed Flycatcher.

Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savanna*) is a predominantly neotropical species, with a range that spans from southern South America, where it is a breeding-season resident, north to Mexico (Ridgely and Tudor 1994). It is a rare but regular visitor to North America, most often along the east coast in the fall (McCaskie and Patten 1994). However, they have been recorded north of Mexico in all months of the year except March and there are records from across the United States and Canada, leading Walters and Engel (2000) to predict it as the next species to be added to Illinois' bird list.

Fork-tailed Flycatcher, first state record 16 May 2005. Paul Douglas Forest Preserve, Cook County. Photo by Eric Secker.

Of the four subspecies, the one most frequently encountered north of Mexico is the nominate, southern-breeding subspecies, *T.s. savanna*. This subspecies is a long distance migrant, breeding as far south as central Argentina and wintering in northern South America, north to Trinidad and Tobago (Ridgely and Tudor 1994). Fall North American records are reverse migrants, flying north instead of back south to their breeding grounds. Spring records are likely individuals that overshoot their wintering range. It has been put forth by Kenn Kaufman that fewer birds make it to North America in spring than in fall because they have twice as far to fly; many individuals simply can't make it that far (Perkins 1990). The propensity for spring records from Florida may support this argument (see Figure 1).

Other than suspected records of *T.s. monarchus*, the partially migratory Central American subspecies, from South Texas in winter, all North American records of Fork-tailed Flycatcher are of the nominate subspecies (McCaskie and Patten 1994, Lockwood 1999). This includes all six North American specimens of the species; a specimen of *T.s. sanctamartae*, a resident in northern South America, from New Jersey is considered suspect (Monroe and Barron 1980, McCaskie and Patten, 1994).

Description

The Fork-tailed Flycatcher is an unmistakable species, and the individual at Paul Douglas was no exception. It was a small bodied, small billed, and extremely long-tailed flycatcher. The tail was black (though due to wear and fading it appeared brown in certain light) with white on the outer web of the outer tail feathers. The tail was extremely long and deeply forked, even though the right outermost tail feather was broken. The body and bill were smaller than on nearby Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*). It had a black head with the white malar region and throat, contrasting with a medium-light gray nape and back. The uppertail coverts were dark gray or black. The wing coverts were brown from wear. The exposed tertial on the folded wing appeared darker than the rest of the folded wing, with a thin pale edge, possibly indicating that the prebasic molt had commenced. Indeed, an adult specimen from Colombia in late April shows a similar pattern (Field Museum of Natural History 298064). The underparts from the throat to the undertail coverts were clean, snowy white. The legs, bill, and eye were black. Other observers commented seeing pale feathers in the crown.

It was very active, feeding in typical *Tyrannus* fashion, sallying out for insects and returning to the