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# FIRST RECORD OF FORK-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*TYRANNUS SAVANA*) IN NEVIS, WEST INDIES

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*Abstract*. --- I observed and had photographed a Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) on Hanley's Road, below Holmes Hill and the windward side of the island of Nevis adjacent to the Caribbean Sea (IHO 1953: 14-15), St. George Gingerland Parish, Nevis, The Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis, West Indies, on 17 February 2010.

*Key words*. --- *Caribbean, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Nevis,* Tyrannus savana.

## FORK-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*TYRANNUS SAVANA*)

Four subspecies of Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) have been described (Zimmer 1937) and are presently recognized (Traylor 1979; Dickinson 2003: 376; Fitzpatrick 2004: 425) and the nominate race, *T. s. savana* Vieillot, 1808, is the subspecies that:

> Breeds over much of southern South America from eastern Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and southern Brazil south to Patagonia, migrating extensively northward after breeding to northern South America (west to Columbia), Trinidad, Tobago, and southern Lesser Antilles and, casually, to Cuba, Bermuda and the North American continent (Monroe and Barron 1980: 842).

The primary resident range of this species is Central and South America (Raffaele *et al* 1998: 363): Both its complex resident and complex winter range distributions by subspecies are more precisely defined in AOU (1998: 415), Fitzpatrick (2004: 425), and Monroe and Barron (1980: 842).

The nominate race of this species is an austral migrant that breeds in south temperate South America during the southern summer and migrates north for the austral winter (Chesser 1997: 171). This species is also a rare example of a Neotropical resident that is resident, partially migratory, and nomadic (Fitzpatrick 2004: 425) and is known to stray regularly to the United States and Canada, and most particularly to the northeastern United States and northeastern Canada (Knight 1910; Bond 1940; James 1963; Kaufman 1977; Monroe and Barron 1980; Shepherd and Smith 1996; AOU 1998; Sibley 2000; Teul *et al* 2007: 480). The Fork-tailed flycatchers documented in the United States and Canada 'are believed to be of the highly migratory nominate subspecies' (McCaskie and Patten 1994: 117): Bond (1993: 152) was of a similar opinion.

The Fork-tailed Flycatcher is also known to have wintered casually in the Lesser Antilles (Barbados, Grenada, and the Grenadines (AOU 1998: 415). Raffaele *et al* (1998: 363, 478) lists this species as a recorded vagrant in the Greater Antilles on the islands of Cuba, the Cayman Islands, and Jamaica. In the Lesser Antilles it is listed as a

recorded vagrant on the islands of St. Martin, St. Barthelemy, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent, and the Grenadines (Carriacou) (Raffaele *et al* 1998: 363, 478-479) (Carriacou is politically a part of the tri-island country of Grenada but is geographically often referred to as an island in the Grenadines). In addition, this species is also considered 'a very rare, local and regularly occurring migrant on [the island of] Grenada primarily in July and August. [It] frequents the vicinity of the airport' (Raffaele *et al* 1998: 363).

Subsequent records and reported sightings in *North American Birds* (1973-2009) since the publication of Raffaele *et al* (1998) were on, at or near: Coles, Barbados, 24 August 2000 (54: 110); New Providence, Bahamas, 3 May 2004, a single immature (a First Record for the Bahamas) (58: 451); Gibb's, St. Peter Barbados, 17 September 2007 (61: 161); La Desirade Island, Guadeloupe, 9 April 2007 (a 4$^{th}$ Record for Guadeloupe) (61: 528); and Green Beach, Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, 8 June 2007 (a First Record for Puerto Rico) (61: 654).

The Fork-tailed Flycatcher subspecies that breeds in southern South America and winters in northern South America has been used as an example by Newton (2008: 289) of reversed migration (reversed-migrants), in which the winter migration to northern South America is effectively re-continued northward again in the austral spring rather than returning southward to southern South America for breeding purposes. The migration and nomadism of this species, and its subspecies, are made more complex, in that, different subspecies of Fork-tailed Flycatcher, in different locations throughout Central and South America, apparently breed at different times of the year (Fitzpatrick 2004: 425).

Of the North American records listed in Monroe and Barron (1980: 844), circa 70% of the 40 North American records were between the months of August and November. Of the North American records listed in McCaskie and Patten (1994; 123-127), which evaluates, eliminates, and builds upon the prior work of Monroe and Barron (1980) (including records in North America through October of 1992), circa 64% of the included 94 records in the United States and Canada were between the months of August and November and circa 30% of the 94 records included in McCaskie and Patten (1994: 123-127) were within the months of April to July. Only a single North American record is from the month of February, a single immature *T. s. savana* in 1961 near Edinburg, Texas (Monroe and Barron 1980: 844; McCaskie and Patten 1994: 123-127).

Of the Caribbean records of Fork-tailed Flycatchers noted since 1971 in *North American Birds* (and its predecessor publications), none were reported in the month of February or in close proximity to the month of February (January to March).

Circa 54% of the records accepted by McCaskie and Patton (1994: 123-127) were documented north of North Carolina in predominately coastal regions of the northeastern United States and Canada. This apparent 'preference' of general locale for a nomadic Central and South American bird species is of a curious nature and involves an unknown route or routes of nomadism.

The issues, particularly of reversed migration and the dispersals of this species and subspecies, are undoubtedly much more complex and await more data, particularly regarding the specific subspecies involved, their ages, their lengths of stay, and the geographic origins of those nomadic individuals.

As per the AOU (1998: 415), this species' 'patterns of migration and local movement across [its] entire range, including within Middle America, are poorly understood' and 'movements throughout much of this species wide range require clarification' (Fitzpatrick 2004: 425).

## NEVIS

Nevis is a compact oceanic island of volcanic origin with an area of circa 93 km$^2$, situated in the northern Lesser Antilles. Politically it is a portion of the two island country, the Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis. The island rises gradually from the shore to a central peak of circa 985 meters and exhibits a range of natural and secondary habitats which include: elfin woodland, montane forest, palm brake, grassland, coastal scrub, dry woodland, and farmland (Robinson and Lowery 2000).

## THE RECORDED SIGHTING

On 17 February 2010, I observed and had photographed a single Fork-tailed Flycatcher, both perched and flying in fluttered flight from barbed wire fenced section to barbed wire fence section, along the southern side of Hanley's Road, below Holmes Hill and the Caribbean Sea (the windward side), Nevis (17 degrees, 6 minutes, 43.52 seconds N, 62 degrees, 33 minutes, 22.64 seconds W; WGS-84; and circa 75 feet above sea-level). The bird was studied through binoculars (Swarovski, 10x42 EL) at close range (10-15 meters) in mid-day light for circa 5 minutes and was also observed, both flying and perched, by Margot Anfinsen Britton, Benjamin B. Britton, and Megan B. Britton. The bird was photographed by Benjamin B. Britton with a Nikon Coolpix P-90 with a Nikkor 24X Optical Zoom ED VR 4.6 – 110.4 mm, 1:2.8 – 5.0 lenses (Fig. 1).

The section of Hanley's Road in which the bird was observed can be characterized as an infrequently used, single lane, rural dirt road, in a gently sloping savanna-like, grassland area, adjacent to the Caribbean Sea, on the windward side of the island of Nevis, which has regenerated growth as a consequence of relatively recent fencing which has uncharacteristically been maintained. This is an artificial construct of a landscape, but is in stark contrast to the substantially altered lower elevation landscapes of Nevis as a direct consequence of present and long term denudation of vegetation and the substantial consequential soil erosion, by both historic and contemporary anthropogenic activities and by large populations of island wide free ranging ungulate species, to include: sheep; goats; donkeys; horses; pigs; and cattle, on this relatively small island. Large populations of historic period introduced Vervet (Green) Monkeys (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*), believed to be of African origin, as well as introduced Mongooses (Family *Herpestidae*) further contribute to the alteration of the disfigured landscape. The fenced sections along this portion of Hanley's Road have allowed for a succession landscape of savanna-like grasses circa 1 to 2 feet in height (Fig. 1).

This photo-documentation represents the first record of a Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savanna*) on the island of Nevis, West Indies.

In contrast, the presence of a single Fork-tailed Flycatcher in mid-February on Nevis, West Indies, within its otherwise general breeding period in Central and South America, which is broadly and various between October and June (Fitzpatrick 2004: 425; AOU 1998: 415), is generally consistent with the concept of reversed migration, but the absence of all but a single record of this species outside its normal range in February raises additional unanswered questions.

No action was taken to determine the age, sex, or other physiological conditions of the individual. Efforts will be made to relocate this particular individual and document its longer term behaviors.

The significance of this sighting remains undetermined. Combined with past and future records, fuller patterns may become clearer. As in this case, and in the future, increasing numbers of bird watchers and researchers in the field, on comparatively remote and under frequented islands, for sustained periods of time, may account for increasing numbers of documented reports.

This Fork-tailed Flycatcher is thought to be the 148$^{th}$ species of bird documented for the island of Nevis, West Indies (Ludlow 2007).

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**Fig. 1. Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*), Hanley's Road, looking southeast, St. George Gingerland Parish, Nevis, West Indies, dated 17 February 2010. Photograph taken by Benjamin B. Britton at the request of Mark Michael Ludlow.**

**Fig. 2. Illustration of Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) for purposes of comparison. Source: Whatbird.com.**