

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers: the Texas Bird of Paradise

By: Rebekah Snyder

It was early April and I was camping near Roma, Texas, at a small campground near the Rio Grande. Nestled in the southern Texas Plains just a few minutes' drive from the Mexican border, I hadn't decided on how long I intended to stay before making my trip northward to the Pecos River and Big Bend, two must-see stops on my list as I traveled through Texas along the border.

While visiting this area, I was fortunate enough to see the first wave of Scissor-tailed flycatchers come through. I remember the day perfectly. It was golden hour and the sky and fields had a beautiful hue. It had been almost 10 years since I had seen my last Scissortail, and I wasn't expecting to see it again at that particular moment... but there it was, perched in an isolated tree that grew along the gravel entry road to the campground. Unmistakable. Breathtakingly elegant. The Scissor-tailed flycatchers had arrived!

The next morning, I took my camera out to try to find the bird again. To my luck, I only had to walk about thirty feet from where my camp was set up to find one. The flycatcher was perched on the outer parts of a branch that extended from the lone tree that was growing in the open grassy field. It was diligently watching and waiting to grab its insectivorous breakfast from the grasses, a textbook description of their foraging behavior and habitat. Meeting this bird again after all of these years was like catching up with a long lost friend. It was almost like no time had passed at all.

Back in 2009, I was still in Enid, Oklahoma. As a young birder of the northeast, I had only ever listened in wonder to the stories other birdwatchers would tell me about the flycatcher's exaggerated long tail and elegant beauty. It was late summer in Enid, and the birds were wrapping up their breeding season and getting ready to move southward – and they were doing it in large flocks. Dozens were seen in flight as I'd drive through town. It wasn't till later that I learned that these flycatchers, along with other similar species such as the Fork-tailed flycatcher, will get together in large groups during the spring and fall to embark on their southward migration.

Scissor-tailed flycatchers breed in grasslands and prairies of the Midwest. Known as the State Bird to Oklahoma, here in Texas they are sometimes called the Texas Bird of Paradise. At their wintering grounds they have been given the Spanish name *Tirano Tijereta Rosado*, or the Pink Earwig Tyrant, where their name refers to the rosy-salmon colored feathers that appear on their sides and underbelly. In the United States, we have given them the name *Scissor-tails* that refers to their long and extended tail feathers that resemble the shape of a scissor. This feature is their main identifying characteristic and is greatly admired by every birder and non-birder alike.

Here in Texas, we are amid fall migration for birds, and Scissor-tails are on the move once more. They begin migrating as early as September and continue throughout October. Come November, however, most individuals have migrated through the area. For your chance to see a migrant, keep your eyes peeled on fencing wire and powerlines along pastures and fields. They are often perched on these areas while foraging, but they can also be seen in urban areas, too!

Photo by Rebekah Snyder. Caption: A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher rests on a branch.