

Least (But Not Last) Flycatcher

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Spring is here, and thoughts go to warblers, tanagers, buntings, grosbeaks, and other colorful birds that are just arriving after spending the winter down south. Particularly for those in the East and the North, the arrival of all of this diversity

and color is a clear sign that winter is a thing of the past; flowers, insects, and life in general is bursting at the seams.

There you are, enjoying the redstarts, Cape Mays, and yellow-rumps, then, as you scan the midstory of the woods... Oh no!

A flycatcher—and all that joy turns to confusion. You've been told by experienced birders, who must know, that flycatchers are impossible to identify. Do you just ignore it or stay with it and try to sort it out? If you ignore it, how are you ever going to learn how to identify these drab species? You decide to stay with it, watch it, and listen

to it, and eventually you decide it is a least flycatcher. But how did you know that, and how can you learn more? This is what we will tackle here: not all of the flycatchers, but the least flycatcher as the gateway to understanding small-flycatcher identification.

In much of the East, if you see a small flycatcher

with a nicely formed eye ring and you identify it as a least flycatcher, you are more often than not going to be correct. The least flycatcher is the most common and readily found of the eastern flycatchers. Of

course, this is no way to identify a bird, based on probability alone.

However, probability is not to be ignored. We use probability all of the time when identifying birds. If you see a pewee in central Ohio, it is most likely an eastern wood-pewee and not a western based solely on the map. You can then listen to it and observe details of the coloration to confirm



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your suspicion, of course. But taking this one step further, most birders are not even considering a tropical pewee or a blackish pewee, species seen south of the U.S. border, as possibilities. Those are so unlikely that they are irrelevant in your identification process. Likewise, it's reasonable to begin with the hypothesis that a little flycatcher in the East is a least, unless you see reasons not to accept that identification and move to a different option.

Oh, the Empids!

The least flycatcher belongs to a group of flycatchers called the “empids,” because they belong to the genus *Empidonax*. These are the smallest of the flycatchers and some of the trickiest to identify. They all have pale wing bars and classic flat flycatcher bills, and many also show a pale eye ring. They tend to sit upright on branches and are “sit and wait” predators: They wait for insects to come by and then fly over to eat them. There are many species of empids, some found only in the East and others only in the West, and one species—the willow flycatcher—that spans from the West to the East. As a group, they are sometimes mistaken for the pewees in the genus *Contopus*, which includes the olive-sided flycatcher. Pewees are a tad larger (or obviously so, as in the olive-sided) than empids.



As is typical with many flycatchers, pewees have stereotypical behaviors. They dart out from an open branch to catch an insect and usually return to the same branch. They tend to be obvious and easy to see, and this behavior of sallying out and returning to the same spot is classic. They are darker-plumaged than empids and tend to have no obvious eye rings and very short legs—they can look like they are sitting on their bellies. Key is that pewees have quite long wings that resemble knife blades jutting out from the folded tertials and secondaries. Looking at wing length is not something we are used to doing, but with flycatchers, it's important. Have a look at photos of pewees and least flycatchers to see what those primary feathers look like and what a long pewee wing looks like and how it relates to empid wings.



Acadian flycatcher.



Yellow-bellied flycatcher.

Because empids are so similar in appearance, vocalizations are important in separating them. Even the slightest single note call can be useful!

Least flycatcher, specifically, is on the small side even for an empid; its name is not a bad one. At first, all empids will look exactly the same to you. But, as with anything, as you sample more you get to know the nuance. It's like becoming a coffee or wine connoisseur: The more reference points you have, the more differences you can find. As noted, the least flycatcher is small and compact. They can look big-headed, and the tail is on the short side and narrow. I always think it looks like a little popsicle stick. When you begin to compare wing lengths of empids, you will see that the least's wing is on the short side. You "measure" this by looking at the projecting

wing feathers (the primaries) that stick out past the rest of the folded wing (secondaries and tertials). On some empids, the wing is long, such as in Acadian and Hammond's from the West. (And recall the long-winged pewees.) This is sometimes subtle, but wing length can be quite obviously different, as soon as you get the a hang of looking for it. Some of these features can be easy to see by taking a photo and then zooming in, and another prerequisite is to invest in good, clear, high-quality optics.

Not Too Flashy

Empids in general are greenish to brownish above and paler below. These are dull birds, although some species can be surprisingly bright green above and yellowish below. Least is not one of these bright-green species, like the yellow-bellied and Acadian flycatchers. Least

flycatcher is dull greenish above, particularly on the back. On average, the head is more grayish; specifically the back of the neck is grayish, becoming greenish again on the crown and face. When seeing a least flycatcher from behind and in muted light, the green back contrasting with gray nape can be noticeable. The face is grayish-toned but overall green, with a substantial whitish eye ring. If you look at the specifics of the eye ring, it is narrowest above the eye and can almost appear broken there on some leasts. It is widest in front and behind the eye; the wide part at the back of the eye may form a point.

Below, leasts have a slightly more olive “vest” that contrasts with a white throat and yellow-washed belly. The yellow on the belly is heaviest on fall juveniles. On most empids, the darkest parts of the plumage are the wings and tail. Empids of the East have darker wings than empids of the West. The wings of a dusky or Hammond’s flycatcher of the West are more on the slate-grayish side than blackish, as on a least. With that in mind, the least flycatcher is blackish-winged and has two bold whitish wing bars. The tertials and secondaries of the folded wing are each edged crisply with white, creating a pale panel on the wing that does not



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reach the lower wing bar, due to these edges abruptly stopping nearer the base of each feather. In fall, some show buffy wing bars, rather than white. This is a sign of a young least, and it applies generally to juveniles of other empids.

All empids have blackish legs and feet. The bills differ between species: Several of the western species have narrower bills, when viewed from below, than the more typical spade shape of most eastern empids. The least has this spade shape, and the mandible is orange-yellow with a dark tip. Some empids have darker bills than others, whereas some, like yellow-bellied and Acadian, have broadly orange-yellow mandibles.

Reference Species

I often emphasize that it’s important to have “reference species” that you know well to compare with similar others.



Willow flycatcher, juvenile.

Least flycatcher is the classic reference species. It is often the most common empid in the East and allows you to use it as a basis for comparison.

Alder and willow flycatchers are often impossible to separate visually; the key there is call. But they are separable from least! The alder and willow are larger, sturdier, with bulky bodies and larger and longer bills. They often look bill-heavy compared with a least. They are much longer-distance migrants, and so have a longer wing. Important is that they look darker-faced than least; the willow can almost lack an eye ring, and the alder is not that far behind. They are also darker above, on the head and back, than a least. They are much sturdier, and from the front, they look broad-shouldered and have a substantial tail—wider, not the popsicle stick of the least.

The Acadian is a colorful greenish empid, mossy green above with a long bill and very long wings. The bill is big and broad, and because it is fully orange-yellow on the mandible, it stands out more than on a least. The eye ring is narrow, unlike the bold eye ring of the least.

The eastern empid that most resembles the least in overall shape is the yellow-bellied flycatcher, but fortunately, it looks unlike it in color. Yellow-bellies are yellowish on the throat—not white, have a darker green-vested look, and are more strongly yellow than a least, even a juvenile least. But, they do have that big-headed look and short tail that the least shows and a similarly shaped eye ring. Yellow-bellieds show more wing length protruding on the folded wing, however. On yellow-bellied, the eye ring is tinged yellow, unlike that of least. In most cases, the brighter green above and yellow below will differentiate them, but some worn yellow-bellieds can look paler. In these cases, look at the throat: It contrasts less with the face on a yellow-bellied than on a least. On least, the throat is white, and the face is greenish-gray, real differences, and it switches abruptly from one to the other. It is more gradual and subdued on a yellow-bellied, which is yellow-toned on the throat.

Western Empids

I have not mentioned the western species too much, because least is mainly a bird of the East, although they do breed to eastern British Columbia and throughout Alberta. In these areas they will overlap with some western species. Look for the broad spade-like bill on least and the blackish wings. But the key is to listen. The call note that least gives throughout the year is a simple *whit*. It is most similar to the call of the willow flycatcher, although it has a slightly sharper note. Visibly, the near lack of eye ring and sturdier broad-shouldered and wider-tailed look should separate the willow. The alder has a *pip* call, yellow-bellied gives a plover like *pwee*, and Acadian a sharp *peek!* Least calls are frequently given; learn that *whit* call, and it will help immensely. In the breeding areas, the song of the least is not all that exciting, but it is distinctive. It is a simple *che-bek!* that is repeated somewhat rapidly. The only empid that sounds like it is the much more northerly breeding yellow-bellied; it gives a *chebunk*, but deeper-sounding and not so emphatic. Listen to these on your apps or online. Most birders do not get to hear the song of the yellow-bellied because they breed well to the north. The songs of willow, alder, Acadian, and all of the western species have no

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- Small empid
- Entire eye ring
- Short, dark wings
- Two bold wingbars
- Dull greenish back
- Gray nape and head
- Olive "vest" contrasts with white throat and yellowish belly
- Orange/yellow mandible

resemblance to the song of the least. So again, it's good to listen to them and learn this song even if it is only useful during spring and summer.

Keep at it! Don't give up because empids are hard. Taking on the challenge is good. Heck, if you can figure out the empids, you have climbed the Everest of birding. Even if you get only to Base Camp One, you are getting there, and along the way you are gaining a good deal of experience. Many longtime birders like empids because they force them to slow down and watch carefully as well as listen. 🦅

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