

Yellow-bellied vs Least Flycatcher

By late summer / early fall, some adult Yellow-bellied Flycatchers may appear grayish white below...a far cry from their deep and bright early-spring finery; most of their fall molt is completed after their arrival in the wintering grounds. All eastern Empidonax flycatchers can show buff-yellowish tones throughout the underside, and, when availing a fleeting view in certain lighting conditions, can appear similar to Yellow-bellied throughout the underside, except for the throat. Just yesterday I was taken aback re: how bright and colorful one Least Fly' was; for a split second, I thought for certain it was a Yellow-bellied.



Photo: A comparison of a relatively drab Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (right) with a Least Flycatcher (photographed by Kyle Blaney, <http://www.kyleblaney.com/>, at left).



Photo: A comparison of a relatively drab Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (right) with a Least Flycatcher (photographed by Kyle Blaney, <http://www.kyleblaney.com/>, at left). Ventral view.

Identification

With **YELLOW-BELLIED**, the overall GISS is that of an especially large and round-headed flycatcher with a moderate primary projection and a proportionally short tail. Note the high-contrast between the jet black wing and the green back; the orange-yellow lower mandible to its proportionally stout bill; and its dusky-yellow throat is unique among eastern Empids. Generally, the eye ring is quite pronounced, esp. along the posterior edge, and sometimes shows a light teardrop shape. The high-contrast black wing -> greenish upperparts is consistent regardless of the age/molting scenario. Personally, that's my go-to for distant, flitting birds. With **LEAST**, the overall GISS is that of a large-headed flycatcher with a relatively short primary projection and a short and thin tail. The tones throughout the upperparts are light-medium brownish-gray; the throat is off-white and shows contrast with the medium brown-gray to the sides of the head; the

eye ring is usually quite bright and well-defined; and the bill is relatively small re: both its width and its length.

Least Flycatcher ID

Ratty-looking adult Least Flycatchers are on the move south as early as the third week of July, entirely petering out by late August. Juveniles peak a month later (amazing, eh?), peaking from late August until the end of the first week of September (Hussell, 1981). Juvenile Least Flycatchers are quite bright grayish-green throughout the upperparts and in some examples, the underparts are lightly “vested” with dusky tones. The throat may appear entirely dusky from certain angles. Some birds may not be safely separated from Yellow-bellied Flycatchers in the field (Kaufman, 1990). Most of the birds (~80%) I have encountered are giving a light “whit” call, similar to Willow Fly, but less emphatic and lower in pitch. Note: at this time of year, I would caution against identifying a flycatcher to species based off a “whit” note.



Figure 1: Dusky “vest” and lightly-marked throat, which appears dark at certain angles.



Figure 2: Same bird — different lighting. When shadowed, the dusky vest and light dusky wash to the throat are quite pronounced.



Figure 3: In good lighting, an immaculate first year Least is such a wonderful study. Note the broad buffy wing bars, dusky “vest”, and whitish throat w/ a light suffusion of dusky tones. In this shot, its rectal bristles show through quite nicely.

As always, with Least: large head; pale throat contrasting with underparts; significant, bright eyering; proportionally small, balanced bill (not esp. broad-based...like Yellow-bellied); orange lower mandible with dusky tip; short primary projection; short and thin tail.

References

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