

# Field identification of *Myiarchus* flycatchers in Mexico

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## Resumen

El género *Myiarchus* incluye algunos papamoscas (Tyrannidae) bastante grandes que se encuentran desde Norteamérica y el Caribe hasta Sudamérica. Este artículo versa sobre la identificación de seis especies de *Myiarchus* de extraordinaria similitud, variadamente simpátricas encontrados en Méjico: *M. cinerascens*, *M. nuttingi*, *M. tyrannulus*, *M. crinitus*, *M. tuberculifer*, y *M. yucatanensis*, junto con la especie cercana *Deltarhynchus flammulatus*.

## Introduction

The genus *Myiarchus* comprises a number of fairly large tyrant-flycatchers found from North America and the Caribbean to South America. This paper treats the identification of the six species of *Myiarchus* found in Mexico: Ash-throated *M. cinerascens*, Nutting's *M. nuttingi*, Brown-crested *M. tyrannulus*, Great Crested *M. crinitus*, Dusky-capped *M. tuberculifer*, and Yucatan *M. yucatanensis* flycatchers, together with the closely related Flammulated Flycatcher *Deltarhynchus flammulatus*.

The Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers are all fairly slender and large-headed with peaked to slightly crested napes (Plate opposite). Their upperparts are grey-brown to olive with paler edgings to the wing coverts, and rufous edgings to the remiges (flight feathers). The throat and chest are grey and the belly pale yellowish. Juveniles differ from adults by having more extensive cinnamon-rufous edgings to their remiges which, in migratory species, are generally not moulted until after migration. The sexes are similar in appearance, although males average larger-billed than females. For field identification purposes, geographic variation is obvious in one species (Dusky-capped), and slight in three others (Nutting's, Brown-crested, and Yucatan). The bills of Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers are blackish with some pale flesh colour at the base of the lower mandible; the legs and feet are blackish.

*Myiarchus* flycatchers inhabit forested and scrubby habitats. Generally they do not perch conspicuously, and they can sit still and quietly for long periods. They are vocal mostly in early morning and, although common in many areas, all species can be overlooked easily.

**Plate:** *Myiarchus*, streaked flycatchers, and allies, by Sophie Webb

1. Ash-throated Flycatcher *M. cinerascens*;
2. Dusky-capped Flycatcher *M. tuberculifer*;  
(a: *olivascens*, western Mexico;  
b: *lawrencei*, south-eastern Mexico);
3. Yucatan Flycatcher *M. yucatanensis*;  
(a: *yucatanensis*, Yucatan Peninsula;  
b: *lanyoni*, Isla Cozumel);
4. Nutting's Flycatcher *M. nuttingi*;
5. Brown-crested Flycatcher *M. tyrannulus*;  
(a: *magister*, western Mexico;  
b: *cooperi*, eastern Mexico);
6. Great Crested Flycatcher *M. crinitus*;
7. Flammulated Flycatcher *Deltarhynchus flammulatus* (7a: worn plumage);
8. Piratic Flycatcher *Legatus leucophaeus*;
9. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher *Myiodynastes luteiventris* (9a: variation in throat pattern);
10. Streaked Flycatcher *Myiodynastes maculatus*;
11. Bright-rumped Attila *Attila spadiceus*;  
(a: *mexicanus*, West Mexico;  
b: *gaumeri*, Yucatan Peninsula).

## The problem

The Mexican and Central American *Myiarchus* flycatchers appear remarkably uniform overall, and up to four species are sympatric in some areas (to the extent that they can occur together in a single fruiting tree!). In general there are two main problem areas: west coast taxa and east coast taxa. In western Mexico, Ash-throated, Nutting's, Brown-crested and Dusky-capped flycatchers all occur sympatrically; Flammulated Fly-

catcher is also found in much of this region. In eastern Mexico, Brown-crested, Great Crested, Dusky-capped and Yucatan flycatchers occur sympatrically. Maps 1-7 show the distributions of *Myiarchus* and Flammulated flycatchers in Mexico and northern Central America.

Specific identifications of *Myiarchus* are best based on diagnostic call notes, with due attention paid to relative bill size, and tail patterns. Face pattern and wing pattern are also useful. Note that the pattern of rufous on the outer rectrices can often be seen in the field by looking at the underside of the closed tail.

Songs are given in the nesting season only, often at or before dawn, and are of limited identification value when it's too dark to see the singing bird. Fortunately, the Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers all have diagnostic call notes which are given fairly frequently. In addition, all species have a varied repertoire of "generic" chattering and bickering calls, harder to transcribe and generally less useful for specific identification.

The following species accounts and Table summarize the identification features of the Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers and the superficially similar Flammulated Flycatcher. There are three main identification problems: Ash-throated, Nutting's, and Brown-crested (overall pallid, medium to large, with distinct pale wingbars and obvious rufous in their tails); Brown-crested and Great Crested (large and large-billed with pale wingbars and obvious rufous in their tails); and Dusky-capped and Yucatan (small, relatively small-billed, with dull wingbars and little or no rufous in their tails). Numbers with the following species accounts correspond to those on Plate p.20, and those of Maps 1-7.

**1. Ash-throated Flycatcher *M. cinerascens*** (7.5-8"; 19-20.5 cm). Breeds in deserts of northern Mexico, wintering in scrub on Pacific slope and in adjacent interior south into Central America (Map 1). Diagnostic call notes are a wet to slightly sharp, single-syllable *pip* or *pic*, often quite soft, and a rolled *prreeer*, suggesting a referee's whistle, and a soft *kabrick* or *habrik*, not as loud as a similar call of Brown-crested Flycatcher. Note extensive rufous in outer rectrices with dark area typically spreading across tip.

Separated from Nutting's Flycatcher by

voice, tail pattern (some intermediate patterns occur), strong contrast between rufous edges of primaries and whitish to pale lemon edges of secondaries. Also note Ash-throated's more peaked nape and slightly larger bill, and that the grey from its throat extends up into its face. In fresh plumage, the underparts of Ash-throated are paler overall than Nutting's, without such a contrasting or bright yellow belly. Separated from the larger and rangier Brown-crested Flycatcher by voice, tail pattern, and its proportionately smaller bill.

**2. Dusky-capped Flycatcher *M. tuberculifer*** (6.3-7.3"; 16-18.5 cm). Widespread resident in wooded and forested habitats, riparian groves, etc. (Map 2). Diagnostic call notes are a plaintive, drawn-out *wheeeeu* or *peeeu* (but beware very similar call of Yucatan Flycatcher), and a shorter note followed by a rolled whistle, *whee peeerrrr-rr*. Occasionally gives a soft *whit* or *pip* call not unlike Ash-throated (K. Kaufman *in litt.* 1994). Note dull wingbars and little or no rufous in tail. 2a. *M. t. olivascens* (typical of western Mexico); 2b. *M. t. lawrencei* (typical of south-eastern Mexico).

Western birds are separated readily from sympatric species by voice, relatively slender (but proportionately long) bill, dull wingbars, and tail pattern. Eastern birds are separated from Yucatan Flycatcher by voice, darker head (lacking paler grey lores and eyering), and pale lemon to pale cinnamon edges to tertials. Also note more peaked nape and dull rufous to grey-brown wingbars.

**3. Yucatan Flycatcher *M. yucatanensis*** (7-7.5"; 17.5-19 cm). Resident in thorn forest and woodland in Yucatan Peninsula (Map 3), but generally less common there than Dusky-capped Flycatcher. Diagnostic call notes are a plaintive, drawn-out, slurred *whee-ee-eu* or *hoooooo-eu*, rising then falling, and a drawn-out, plaintive whistle followed by a bright, upward-inflected whistle, *wheeeer hweep*. Note dull wingbars and reduced rufous in tail, separating this species from all except Dusky-capped Flycatcher. 3a. *M. y. yucatanensis* (Yucatan Peninsula); 3b. *M. y. lanyoni* (Isla Cozumel, darker overall than mainland birds). Distinguished from Dusky-capped Flycatcher by voice, lack of dark-headed look, paler greyish lores and often a broad, almond-shaped eyering, and whitish edging to tertials. Also

note less peaked nape and dull grey-brown wingbars.

**4. Nutting's Flycatcher *M. nuttingi*** (7-7.5"; 18-19 cm). Resident in thorn forest on Pacific slope and in interior valleys (Map 4). Diagnostic call notes are a sharp *wheek!* or *wheep*, suggesting Great Crested Flycatcher but shorter and more emphatic, and a doubled *kwee-week!* These calls have a piping or lightly whiny quality that may suggest an American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*, unlike the fuller-toned call of Great Crested Flycatcher. Note extensive rufous in rectrices with dark area typically not expanding across tip.

Separated from Ash-throated Flycatcher by voice, tail pattern (beware intermediate patterns), gradation from rufous edgings of primaries to cinnamon edgings of outer secondaries (southern populations have bright cinnamon edgings to secondaries). Also note bushier, less peaked nape, slightly smaller bill, and brown crown extending down into face; southern populations have brighter yellow bellies than Ash-throated Flycatcher. Separated from the larger and rangier Brown-crested Flycatcher by voice, smaller bill, browner face.

**5. Brown-crested Flycatcher *M. tyrannulus*** (8-9.2"; 20.5-23.5 cm). Resident in thorn forest on Pacific slope, clearings and edges in forest (including rain forest) on Atlantic slope (Map 5). Much of Atlantic slope population withdraws south in winter. Diagnostic call notes are a sharp, slightly to strongly disyllabic *hwuik'* or *h-whik'* and a longer *whik kir-ir-ik*. In Western Mexico, the rolled *berrrrgh berrrrgh* call of Brown-crested (similar to summer call of Great Crested) is distinct from sympatric *Myiarchus* flycatchers (K. Kaufman *in litt.* 1994). Note large size with large, heavy bill, and extensive rufous in tail. 5a. *M. t. magister* (Western Mexico) note very large bill. 5b. *M. t. cooperi* (Eastern Mexico). The insular subspecies *M. t. cozumelae* (Isla Cozumel), and *M. t. insularum* (Honduras Bay Islands) are slightly darker and browner above than mainland birds.

Distinguished from the smaller Ash-throated and Nutting's flycatchers by voice, rangier build and larger-headed look, and larger and heavier bill. Also compare tail pat-

tern with Ash-throated and note pale grey face (unlike Nutting's). Separated from migrant Great Crested by its overall paler and greyer plumage, the brownish cap contrasting with the paler grey face, and less contrast between pale grey chest and pale lemon belly. Also note an extensively pale base to the lower mandible on many Great Crested Flycatchers.

**6. Great Crested Flycatcher *M. crinitus*** (8-8.8"; 20.5-22 cm). Migrant and winter visitor to humid forest and woodland in E and S (breeds NE Mexico) (Map 6). Diagnostic call note a rising, slightly drawn-out, single-syllable *wheep* or *wheep*, most like Nutting's Flycatcher but less emphatic (although possibly louder and more far-carrying overall). A relatively distinctive *Myiarchus* (compare with Brown-crested). Note large size and heavy bill, often with extensively flesh-coloured base of lower mandible; relatively dark olive upperparts with little tonal contrast between olive crown and grey face, and relatively strong contrast between grey chest and yellow belly.

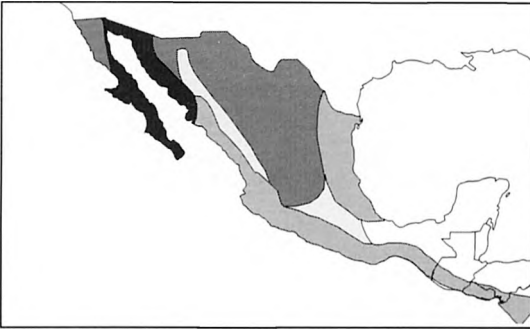
**7. Flammulated Flycatcher *Deltarhynchus flammulatus*** (6-6.5"; 15-16.5 cm). Endemic to the Pacific slope of Mexico (Map 7). The Flammulated Flycatcher is a retiring inhabitant of dense thorn forest where it generally stays well hidden. It is unlikely to be found unless heard but, unlike members of the genus *Myiarchus*, it is largely silent outside the summer breeding season. This species was inadequately described by earlier field guides as like a small *Myiarchus* but with dusky streaking on its chest. It can be overlooked very easily. Its calls include a diagnostic, short plaintive *teeuu* or *chew*, often give 3-5 times in descending series, and its song, given throughout the day in summer, is a plaintive whistle followed by a short, quick roll (*chuu, witi-li-liu*). These all suggest Rose-throated Becard *Pachyramphus aglaiae* more than any western Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatcher.

If seen, the Flammulated Flycatcher can be identified readily by its facial expression: note the pale supraloral stripe and subocular crescent, and the dark loreal stripe. The pale cinnamon wing and tail edgings are also distinctive; the dusky chest streaking can be indistinct. Birds in worn plumage (late summer) are overall duller and greyer (7a).

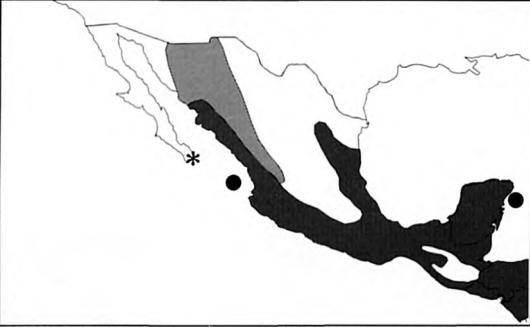
**COTINGA 2**

Distributions of Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers and Flammulated Flycatcher.

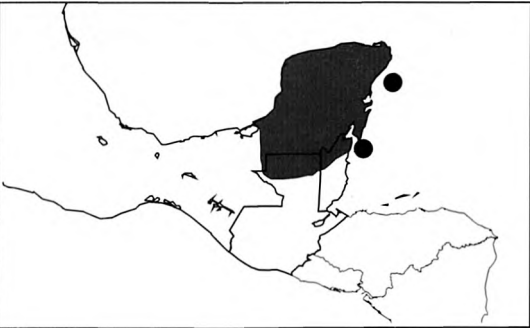
-  resident range
-  summer range
-  winter range
-  occurs during migration only
-  insular populations



**Map 1.** Distribution of Ash-throated Flycatcher *M. cinerascens* in Mexico and northern Central America.

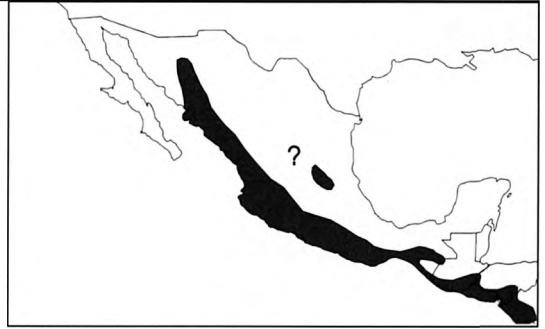


**Map 2.** Distribution of Dusky-capped Flycatcher *M. tuberculifer* in Mexico and northern Central America.

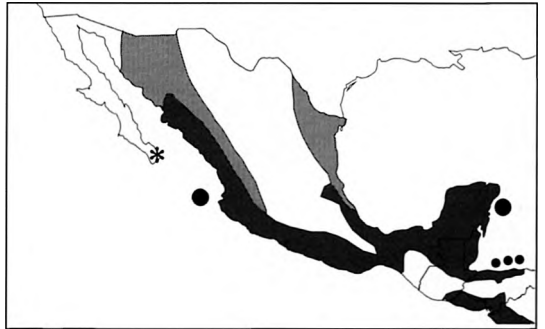


**Map 3.** Distribution of Yucatan Flycatcher *M. yucatanensis* in Mexico and northern Central America.

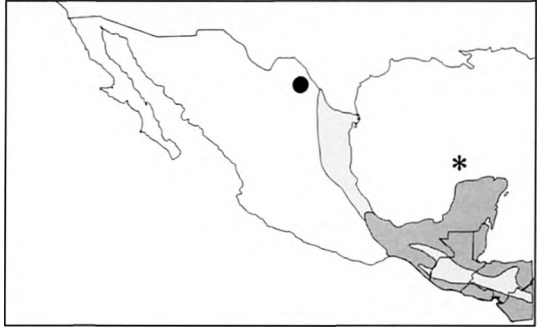
***Myiarchus* flycatchers**



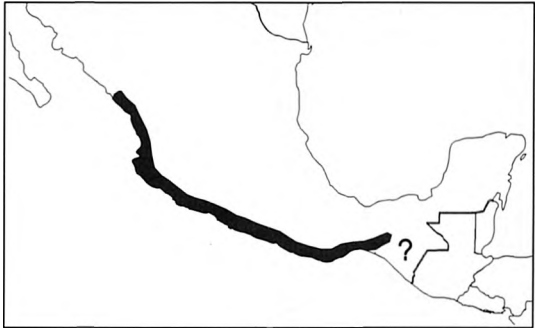
**Map 4.** Distribution of Nutting's Flycatcher *M. nuttingi* in Mexico and northern Central America.



**Map 5.** Distribution of Brown-crested Flycatcher *M. tyrannulus* in Mexico and northern Central America.



**Map 6.** Distribution of Great Crested Flycatcher *M. crinitus* in Mexico and northern Central America.



**Map 7.** Distribution of Flammulated Flycatcher *Deltarhynchus flammulatus* in Mexico.

**Table:** Identification characters of Mexican *Myiarchus* flycatchers and Flammulated Flycatcher.

|                      | Call note                                    | Tail (outer rectrix)        | Wingbars                        | Secondary edgings                | Head/face                         | Relative bill size  |
|----------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Ash-throated</b>  | Quiet <i>pip</i>                             | Rufous with dark across tip | Whitish                         | Pale lemon                       | Pale grey face                    | Medium              |
| <b>Nutting's</b>     | Emphatic <i>wheek!</i>                       | Rufous extends to tip       | Whitish                         | Pale cinnamon                    | Grey-brown face                   | Medium              |
| <b>Brown-crested</b> | 2-syllable <i>h-whick'</i>                   | Extensive rufous            | Whitish                         | Pale lemon                       | Brown cap, pale grey face         | Large to very large |
| <b>Great Crested</b> | Rising <i>wheep</i>                          | Extensive rufous            | Whitish                         | Pale lemon                       | Olive cap, same tone as grey face | Large               |
| <b>Dusky-capped</b>  | Plaintive <i>wheeeeu</i>                     | Reduced rufous              | Dull grey-brown to rufous-brown | Pale lemon in NW to rufous in SE | Dark head (less so in NW)         | Small               |
| <b>Yucatan</b>       | Plaintive rising & falling <i>whee-ee-eu</i> | Reduced rufous              | Dull grey-brown                 | Rufous                           | Grey lores and broad eye-ring     | Small               |
| <b>Flammulated</b>   | See text                                     | Reduced cinnamon            | Cinnamon                        | Cinnamon                         | Pale supra-loral, dark lores      | Small               |

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