

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

Tyrannus forficatus

An elegant gray and salmon-pink flycatcher festooned with an absurdly long tail, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is the bird to look for on fence wires in the south-central United States. They typically perch in the open, where their long, forked tails make an unmistakable silhouette. The tail proves useful as they expertly catch insects on the wing with sharp midair twists and turns. In late summer and early fall, scissor-tails gather in large, bickering flocks to migrate to Mexico and Central America.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are slender, stout-billed kingbirds with very long, stiff, deeply forked tails. Males have longer tail feathers than females and immatures.

Color Pattern

These are pale gray birds with blackish wings and black tails with white edges. Adults have salmon-pink flanks that extend to underwing patches that are very conspicuous in flight. Males are more intensely colored than females.

Behavior

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perch conspicuously on utility lines, treetops, and fence lines to watch for insect prey and defend their territories from interlopers. They are agile in the air, spreading their long tails wide to make abrupt turns and stalls. They are highly territorial, and will chase other birds out of their territories accompanied by loud, squeaky, bubbling calls.

Habitat

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers breed in open habitats in the southern Great Plains and south Texas, especially around scattered trees or utility lines. They tolerate human presence well and frequently breed in towns.

Cool Facts

- The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher forms large premigratory roosts in late summer, with up to 1,000 birds in one flock. They often roost near towns, perhaps taking advantage of the large trees as roosting sites.
- Scissor-tailed Flycatchers tend to wander widely on their way to and from the wintering grounds, a habit they share with Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Tropical Kingbirds. During spring and fall they may show up almost anywhere in North America, as far north as British Columbia and Nova Scotia.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 8.7 - 14.6 inches
- Weight - 1.3 - 2.0 ounces

