

## THE FIRST TROPICAL KINGBIRD NEST IN NEW MEXICO

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**ABSTRACT:** A nest of the Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) at Sumner Lake State Park, De Baca County, 17 June 2022, was the first found in New Mexico. It followed summer sightings elsewhere in southern New Mexico since 2010 and is part of a pattern of northward spread of the species' breeding range in Arizona and Texas.

On 17 June 2022 at about 13:45, I discovered a vocal Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) in the riparian woodland along the Pecos River below the dam at Sumner Lake State Park, De Baca County, New Mexico. It initially drew my attention by its repeated rising twittery calls diagnostic of the species (<https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/460546621>). The kingbird vocalized for a short time on the east side of the river but quickly returned to a distant, isolated cottonwood (*Populus sp.*) on the west side (34° 36' N, 104° 23' W) in the southwestern portion of the state park campground. After observing the bird from the east side of the river for several minutes, I saw that it was defending a territory, chasing any Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*) that came near the cottonwood. Further observation closer to the isolated cottonwood from the west side of the river revealed a second Tropical Kingbird, which chased Western Kingbirds away from the tree. Both birds were very vocal, giving the same twittery calls, and returned to the cottonwood after escorting Western Kingbirds away, suggesting a nest was nearby.

After about 20 min of searching I found a fully constructed nest near the top center of the cottonwood when the female flew directly back to it and sat on it after engaging in a chase. The nest was approximately 8 m above the ground and was loosely constructed of grasses and twigs (Figure 1). The male (Figure 2), identified by its larger bill and tail with deeper notch, often perched nearby while the female was sitting on the nest and took part in the majority of the territory defense, engaging in longer chases farther from the nest, disappearing for several minutes at a time. This behavior continued for the remaining hour or so of observation.

I returned the next day, 18 June, at 11:30 and found the female sitting on the nest and the male perched nearby. The pair was much quieter but still chased Western Kingbirds that approached too closely throughout the half-hour observation. Neither of the kingbirds brought food to the nest on either day, suggesting that the female was incubating. Birders reported at least one kingbird in the area through the next week, but never on the nest, and the two birds were last seen together on 29 June (P. Chaon). Only a single bird remained in the area after that date, and it was last seen on 9 July, when I found the nest unattended.

The Tropical Kingbird is found in a wide variety of habitats and elevations from Mexico to Argentina (Howell and Webb 1995, Stouffer et al. 2020). In the United States, it breeds locally in the southern portions of Arizona and Texas. The Arizona population retreats south during the winter (Phillips et al.

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FIGURE 1. Female Tropical Kingbird sitting on the nest located below the dam at Sumner Lake, De Baca County, New Mexico, on 17 June 2022.

*Photo by Matthew J. Baumann*

1964, Stouffer et al. 2020), while the Texas population in the lower Rio Grande valley appears to be resident (Lockwood and Freeman 2014). The species is an annual fall vagrant along the west coast of the United States, regularly found as far north as Washington (Mlodinow 2005, <https://eBird.org>).

The Tropical Kingbird nest at Sumner Lake is the first one confirmed for New Mexico, though the species has occurred recently during the breeding season, May–August, in the lower Rio Grande and Pecos valleys (Williams 2022, Williams and Baumann 2023), suggesting it might have attempted nesting previously. The first Tropical Kingbirds documented in the state were two birds present for nearly a month in July and August 2010 at a former country club in Santa Teresa, Doña Ana County; they were thought to be a mated pair, but evidence of breeding was not observed. Additionally, of two

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FIGURE 2. Agitated male Tropical Kingbird defending the nest tree on 17 June 2022.

*Photo by Matthew J. Baumann*

Tropical Kingbirds at Rattlesnake Springs, Eddy County, in July 2018, one was seen carrying a stick to a possible nesting site, but no nest or fledglings were found. More recently, up to three Tropical Kingbirds, including an apparent juvenile, visited a residential area in La Union, Doña Ana County, in August 2021, and one was again seen in that area in June and July 2022, but direct evidence of local nesting was not confirmed. Sumner Lake lies ~280 km north of these localities, and this attempted nest represents one of the northernmost breeding records anywhere.

It is possible that the Sumner Lake nest was parasitized by the Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*), a well-known brood parasite of this species in the northern portion of the kingbird's range (Stouffer et al. 2020). Two Bronzed Cowbirds were in the cottonwood grove on the west side of the river, near the nest tree, during my visit on 9 July. Alternatively, it is possible that the nest failed because unfamiliar environmental conditions disfavored success at a location far north of the species' current range (e.g., Bachir et al. 2008).

The Tropical Kingbird is a generally rare, local breeder in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas (Lockwood and Freeman 2014) but since 2018 has become well established at Ascarate Lake in El Paso (Carpenter 2021, <https://eBird.org>). Up to 13 birds have been counted during the breeding season at Ascarate Lake, likely the source population for Tropical Kingbirds reaching the Rio Grande

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valley in southern New Mexico. Since discovery of the first nest in Arizona in 1938, the breeding distribution of the Tropical Kingbird in that state has also expanded notably farther north, along the Santa Cruz and San Pedro rivers, and also to areas as far north as Topock Marsh, north of Lake Havasu, along the Colorado River, and to new areas such as eastern Cochise County (Jenness 2015). In summary, the recent spread of Tropical Kingbird breeding in both Arizona and west Texas suggests that the species' breeding range may be expanding northward on a broad front, and its presence during the breeding season in New Mexico might continue given the close proximity of these newly established populations. Continued monitoring for nesting Tropical Kingbirds in southern New Mexico during the warm season, especially along the lower Rio Grande and Pecos River valleys, is warranted to define the changing status of the species in New Mexico.

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