

# FIRST RECORD OF THE SMALL-BILLED ELAENIA (*ELAENIA PARVIROSTRIS*) FOR WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

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**ABSTRACT:** The Small-billed Elaenia (*Elaenia parvirostris*) is a small flycatcher common on the Atlantic slope of South America. The species breeds below 1000 m elevation in open woodlands, gardens, and forest edges from southern Brazil to northeastern Argentina and migrates north to spend the nonbreeding season in the northern Amazon Basin. Since 2012, it has been documented as a vagrant to North America, with four records from the United States and Canada to date. On the basis of one photographed on Southeast Farallon Island on 4 September 2022, we record a fifth Small-billed Elaenia in North America, a first for California and the Pacific coast. Its novelty notwithstanding, it represents an outlier of an established pattern of vagrancy of tyrant flycatchers from South America reaching North America via overshooting or reverse migration.

## OBSERVATION AND IDENTIFICATION

On 4 September 2022, around 16:40 PDT, we encountered an unusual flycatcher on Southeast Farallon Island, California (within the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge; 37° 42' N, 123° 00' W), during a routine island-wide area search for migrant songbirds (Warzybok and Tietz 2022). It was found by Clements, who first observed the bird as it flushed from the lower branches of the “Coast Guard Tree,” one of two scraggly Monterey cypresses (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) on the island, to the densest foliage of the middle layers. After this initial movement, the bird settled in the top branches, where it remained nearly motionless for the few remaining hours of daylight, allowing study by Clements, Tietz, Jonah Benningfield, and Amanda Tveite. It did not vocalize during the period we observed it and was not seen the following day. This bird had arrived on a clear day with strong (16–32 km/hr) northwesterly winds, which tend to inhibit migrant landbirds from arriving on Southeast Farallon Island. On that day, in fact, this bird was noted as the only landbird arriving and was one of only three passerines observed.

We first recognized the bird as an odd flycatcher, possibly a Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*), but soon dismissed this possibility as the bill was too narrow, straight-sided and dark-tipped, the eyering was too well defined, and the breast seemed too pale (see Pyle 1997, Sibley 2014, Lee and Birch 2023). The bill, eyering, and pale underparts recalled those of Gray Flycatcher (*E. wrightii*), but after studying and photographing the bird at length, we noted that the upperparts seemed too colorful, the forehead angle too steep, and the white wing markings too bold and contrasting (see Lee and Birch 2023). Additionally, its behavior was unlike that of any *Empidonax*. We never observed the bird wag or flick its tail, switch perches, or sally, all behaviors commonly displayed by *Empidonax* (see Sibley 2014, Lee and Birch 2023).

When the bird finally did move several feet to a different perch, its movement was direct, deliberate, and more vireo-like than the generally flitty, sporadic movements of *Empidonax* flycatchers. It also had a bushy crown, which was occasionally blown into a crest by the strong northwest wind, another trait absent in *Empidonax*. Post-observation analysis of photos revealed a sharp contrast between the blackish inner and whitish outer web of each greater covert, which gave the wingbars a spotted appearance (see Jaramillo 2021). In the Gray Flycatcher and most other species of *Empidonax*, this color difference between the inner and outer webs of the tips of the greater coverts is diffuse, causing the wingbars to appear more solid (see Lee and Birch 2023). We eventually ruled out that genus on the basis of the bird's deliberate movement, lack of tail flicking or wagging, and unusual wingbar pattern. While viewing the individual in the field, we began to suspect the bird was an elaenia, and our confidence grew after we compared our photos of the Southeast Farallon Island bird with photos of elaenias and *Empidonax*. After arriving at this initial tentative identification, we shared our description and photos with several people with expertise in *Empidonax* and elaenia identification, including Alvaro Jaramillo, Oscar Johnson, Peter Pyle, Ryan Terrill, and Kevin Zimmer.

We focused our identification effort on the three species of elaenia that have occurred in North America: the Greenish (*Myiopagis viridicata*), Small-billed, and White-crested (*Elaenia albiceps*). We quickly eliminated the Greenish Elaenia as it lacks the obvious wingbars that this bird had (see Ridgely and Tudor 1994, Howell and Webb 1995). Distinguishing the Small-billed and White-crested Elaenias by plumage alone is challenging, and this issue has led to much confusion and debate surrounding the identification of past vagrant elaenias to North America (Pyle et al. 2020, 2021, Jaramillo 2021). These two species are visually similar and differences in plumage are subtle, but some field marks are nevertheless useful for identification (Jaramillo 2021, Gorleri and Areta 2022). The White-crested Elaenia has white feathers in the crown that are conspicuous when the crest is erect. It lacks any white tips to the lesser coverts and has broader white tips to the greater and median coverts, creating the appearance of two solid white wingbars. The Small-billed Elaenia has very little if any white feathering in the crown and has white-tipped lesser coverts—which, when visible, create the appearance of a faint third wingbar. In the Small-billed white tips to the outer webs of the greater and median coverts contrast sharply with the black tips of the inner webs, causing the bottom two wingbars to appear somewhat spotted. We also briefly considered the Lesser Elaenia (*E. chiriquensis*) and Olivaceous Elaenia (*E. mesoleuca*) but dismissed both of these because of dissimilarities in their plumage and their limited or nonexistent migratory tendencies (see Ridgely and Tudor 1994).

The Farallon bird had no discernable white crown feathering, despite lengthy study of the individual in the field and photos. Even when a gust of wind ruffled the crown feathers into a more crest-like appearance, white feathers were not observed (Figures 1 and 2). In juvenile plumage the White-crested Elaenia lacks white crown feathering, but since that species' preformative molt occurs from March to August, the white crown feathers should be present in September, when this bird was observed (see Pyle et al.



FIGURE 1. Small-billed Elaenia at Southeast Farallon Island, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, California, 4 September 2022. Note the erect crest lacking white feathers, broad white tertial edging, distinct contrast between the inner and outer webs of the tips of the greater coverts, and overall structure and coloration.

*Photo by James R. Tietz*

2015). Furthermore, in several photographs where the lesser coverts are not covered by the scapulars, white tips can be seen, confirming the presence of a mostly concealed third white wingbar (Figure 3). This third wingbar was not noticed in the field, perhaps because we were initially unaware of its usefulness in identification. Finally, photographs also revealed the lack of white on



FIGURE 2. Small-billed Elaenia at Southeast Farallon Island, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, California, 4 September 2022. Note the overall appearance and posture, and bill and plumage coloration.

*Photo by Nolan M. Clements*



FIGURE 3. Small-billed Elaenia at Southeast Farallon Island, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, California, 4 September 2022. Note the white tipped lesser coverts, confirming the presence of a third wingbar, and the spotted appearance of the median coverts.

*Photo by James R. Tietz*

the inner webs of the greater and median coverts, giving the wingbars a more spotted appearance (Figure 1). Given the features observed and advances in elaenia identification (see especially Jaramillo 2021 and Gorleri and Areta 2022), we concluded that the Farallon bird was a Small-billed Elaenia. The opinions of those with more experience with this and similar species corroborated our conclusion. The record has been accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (<https://www.californiabirds.org/changelog.asp>).

## DISCUSSION

The four Small-billed Elaenias recorded in North America previously occurred in the eastern half of the continent, the first in Chicago, Illinois, in mid-April 2012 (Gyllenhaal 2012). The other three all occurred, remarkably, in 2021: one photographed on Mustang Island near Port Aransas, Texas, on 17 May (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S88403963>; Texas Bird Records Committee 2023); one banded at the Observatoire d'oiseaux de Tadoussac, 189 km northeast of Quebec City, Quebec, on 26 October (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S96748321>; Comité d'Homologation des Oiseaux Rares du Québec 2022); and one at Waukegan, Illinois, 55 km north of Chicago, from 26 November to 7 December (Williamson 2022; many reports via <https://ebird.org>, e.g., <https://ebird.org/checklist/S98467102>). The White-crested Elaenia has been recorded twice in North America: one at South Padre Island, Texas, 9–10 February 2008 (Lockwood et al. 2008) and one near Grand Forks, North Dakota, on 24 October 2020 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75377945>). Three unidentified elaenias, all likely Small-billed or White-crested, were seen near Pensacola, Florida, on 28 April 1984 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S95990765>); at Moonstone Beach, Rhode Island, on 10 November 2008; and on Cudjoe Key, Florida, on 30 May 2021 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S89419095>).

When all previous records of elaenias in North America are pooled, spatial and temporal patterns of vagrancy seem to emerge. All have come from the eastern half of the continent. Eight of the nine previous sightings were during spring (April/May) or fall (October/November) migration. A similar propensity to reverse migration in fall or northbound overshoot vagrancy in spring is well documented in several migratory tyrant flycatchers of the Southern Hemisphere (McCaskie and Patten 1994, Gilroy and Lees 2003, Newton 2008, Mlodinow and Irons 2009, Lees and Gilroy 2009, Howell et al. 2014). Besides the elaenias, other South American tyrannids that follow similar patterns of vagrancy include the Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*), Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*), Piratic Flycatcher (*Legatus leucophaeus*), and Crowned Slaty Flycatcher (*Griseotyrannus aurantioatrocristatus*). Of these, the Fork-tailed Flycatcher occurs most frequently and is well known north of the tropics from late August to early December, and from fewer occurrences from April to mid-July (McCaskie and Patten 1994, Howell et al. 2014). While the Fork-tailed Flycatcher has been recorded as far west as Washington State (Wahl et al. 2005), fewer than 5% of the several hundred records for the United States and Canada have been from the western half of the continent. Occurrences of the Variegated Flycatcher (ten records), Piratic Flycatcher (12 records), and Crowned Slaty Flycatcher (one record) follow a similar pattern, with nearly all records for the United States and Canada from the eastern half of the continent from mid-September through early November, with fewer reports in May and June (Mlodinow and Irons 2009, Howell et al. 2014); the one extreme exception is a Variegated Flycatcher from southeastern Washington in early September (Mlodinow and Irons 2009).

Other tropical and subtropical tyrannids that breed much farther north than the Fork-tailed, Variegated, and Piratic flycatchers—in Mexico and near or within U.S. border states—also exhibit reverse migration in autumn. Among them are the Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*), Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*), Dusky-capped Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer*), and most prominently Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*). The Tropical Kingbird, for example, is well known on the Pacific coast of the U.S. and Canada in autumn (see Campbell et al. 1997, Hamilton et al. 2007), with multiple occurrences as far north as southeast Alaska (Heinl and Piston 2009). Reverse migrants or vagrants following a similar pattern of misorientation have also occurred on Southeast Farallon Island. Since the 1970s, the Dusky-capped Flycatcher (one record), Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*; one record), Tropical Kingbird (38 records), and Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (one record) represent tyrant flycatchers originating much farther south and east that have been documented by Point Blue biologists on the island during the fall.

In this context and despite the exceptional novelty of this record, extreme northward vagrancy of the Small-billed Elaenia seems to fall within a broader pattern of extralimital occurrences of tyrant flycatchers. On the basis of these patterns, the Southeast Farallon Island bird was likely a reverse migrant. Records of elaenias in North America have been increasing in frequency over the last 50 years, perhaps as a result of observers' increasing awareness of the occurrence and identification of this group of flycatchers. As more records of elaenias accumulate, expected times and locations of arrival may

be further solidified, which could reveal that the Small-billed Elaenia is a rare but expected vagrant to the west coast, or conversely that this species follows the pattern of other austral migrants and that this western record is truly exceptional.

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