

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher



Tyrannus forficatus

Identification

Scissor-tailed flycatchers are similar in size to a kingbird, but with long tails. They are about 10 in/26 cm (females) and 13 in/33 cm (males) in length. Adults have a light gray head and back, dark brown wings, white outer tail feathers with black tips, a whiteish belly, salmon-colored sides, and brighter pink armpits. Females and juvenile birds have shorter tails than males and are less brightly colored. Named for their tails, inner tail feathers are shorter than outer feathers, giving the characteristic fork-shape.



Photo credit: [Larry Smith](#)/Flickr

Observation Tips

In the open grasslands of the southern Great Plains, scissor-tailed flycatchers are difficult to miss with their distinct tails, especially when perched on a fence or utility line along the road. From these perches, the birds will chase after insects or defend their territory from other birds, using their long tails to hover, twist and turn in the air. In the spring, listen for their squeaky, ascending song while perched on a tree or wire looking for mates. Scissor-tailed flycatchers migrate in large, noisy flocks, and spend winters in southern Mexico and Central America.

Interesting Fact

During the breeding season, scissor-tailed flycatchers live on their own or with a mate. However, before migrating south for the winter, scissor-tailed flycatchers often gather in large groups to rest (or roost). These flocks may contain a hundred or even a thousand individuals. The birds will also gather in large flocks on their wintering grounds, but they leave the flock to feed on their own or in pairs. They very rarely feed within the large flock.

Ideal Habitat

Scissor-tailed flycatchers breed in open grasslands within the southern Great Plains with scattered trees (1-5% cover) and shrubs (5-30% cover). They will also breed in agricultural fields, pastures, and urban areas, like parks and golf courses, if there are perches and open spaces for feeding and trees or shrubs for nesting. Scissor-tailed flycatchers nest in small, isolated trees or larger shrubs, such as honey mesquite, and occasionally on human structures, like telephone poles that are up to 30 ft/10 m tall.



Range map provided by BirdLife International

Management Activities that Benefit Species – Best Management Practices (BMPs)

Maintain intact open grasslands. When treating large areas for brush removal, retain some strips or patches of untreated brush to protect nest and perch sites for nesting and foraging scissor-tailed flycatchers. Retaining individual or loosely clumped trees and shrubs within open grasslands will also ensure nesting sites for scissor-tailed flycatchers.

Management Activities to Avoid

Avoid conversion of open grasslands to agriculture or residential development. Avoid widespread herbicide application and brush management practices meant to reduce brush cover which may reduce available nest sites. Avoid pesticide exposure which could harm adults and nestlings and reduce insect food sources.

Other Species that Benefit from Similar Habitat Management

Other species that may benefit from habitat management for scissor-tailed flycatchers include western kingbirds and Cassin's sparrows.

Other Resources

BirdLife International and Handbook of the Birds of the World. 2019. Bird species distribution maps of the world. Version 2019.1. [Scissor-tailed flycatcher](#)

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Birds of the World. [Scissor-tailed Flycatcher](#)

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. All About Birds. [Scissor-tailed Flycatcher](#)