

34-92-1001

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## Colorado Field Ornithologists - Rare Bird Report

**Species:** Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*)

**Location:** mouth of Waterton Canyon, Jefferson Co., Colorado

**Date:** 23 October 1992      **Time:** from approx. 3:15 until 3:30 pm  
**Lighting:** direct, full sun      **Weather:** clear, calm, approx. 65°F

**Distance of observation:** the majority of the time the bird was about 100 ft. away.

**Optical Equipment:** Bushnell Banner 8 X 40 binoculars and a Bushnell Spacemaster 15 - 45X spotting scope (used upto full power).

### **Description**

**Plumage:** **Head:** forehead and crown dark chocolate brown; nape medium brown; face and ear coverts blackish-brown; supercilium paler brown; throat white, sharply demarcated from bill, just below the eye, to behind the ear coverts. **Mantle:** like nape, only slightly tinged with olive. **Underparts:** breast was ashy white, gradually turning to pale buffy-yellow on belly and undertail coverts. **Wings:** scapulars like mantle; all flight feathers and coverts dark chocolate brown, broadly edged with buff. **Rump:** like mantle. **Tail:** dark chocolate brown; all retricies thinly edged with buff.

**Bill:** very heavy for a Kingbird; length = 3/4 head length; culman/lower mandible thickness = 1/4 length; gape = 1/3 length; culman curved entire length, more pronounced at tip; lower mandible basically straight; both mandibles entirely black.

**Eye Color:** very dark brown.      **Leg Color:** black.

**Size and Shape:** nothing was seen nearby for direct size comparison; approximately the same size as a Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*); typical *Tyrannus* shape; **Overall stocky appearance:** large, broad head, thick neck, "barrel" chest and belly. **Tail:** approx. 2/3 of the head/body length, relatively broad, rounded, notched. **Wings:** to undertail coverts when sitting, seemed somewhat short and broad in flight (subjective).

### **Behavior**

Flycatching from exposed perches of various heights in cottonwood trees. Flights were usually short with quick, shallow wingbeats. Would not necessarily return to same perch. Its posture at rest was compact and about 30° from the horizontal. Twice it called upon landing; a hoarse, two syllable "paa-reet".

### **Similar Species**

My initial thought at a distance was that of a Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) because of the bird's dark and heavy appearance. After we got closer, I realized this wasn't the case and that we had "a good one". The Cassin's, as well as the Western

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(*T. verticalis*), were ruled out because of this bird's large, heavy head and bill in addition to the marked contrast between the upper and lower parts. This contrast brings to mind the Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*) which can show extensive buffy scaling on the wings and a faint yellow wash underneath on fall immatures, but again, the bulk of the head and bill preclude this species (also, this bird's tail was broad and notched without any presence of a subterminal band).

The most likely candidates for confusion are the Tropical/Couch's group (*T. melancholicus/couchii* sp.), of which I only have experience with Couch's. These birds tend to be heavier built and larger billed than most of the other kingbirds. Also, given their propensity to wonder in the fall, they must be strongly considered. While they can show fairly dark ear coverts that contrast with the white throat, I know of no plumage, or any recorded aberration, that also has the dark brown forehead and crown that this bird had.

If we are looking at the ~~wonderers~~, the Grey Kingbird (*T. dominicensis*) must also be addressed. I have no experience with this species, but the literature I consulted (The Audubon Society's "Master Guide to Birding"; Vol.2, 1983 and National Geographic's "Birds of North America"; sec.ed., 1987) indicates the upper parts are pale grey (slightly brownish in juveniles) with a black tail. Neither of these attributes fits the Waterton bird.

Lastly, other flycatchers should be discussed. The size and "jizz" of this bird rules out virtually all species within reason. The only exceptions are the large *Myiarchus* flycatchers which have squared or rounded tails that should show at least a hint of rust color in our area.

This report was written the day of the observation from notes made in the field (I was just too lazy to get it into the computer until now - 20 June 93). This is a good, if not somewhat odd, state record - should it be accepted of course. I don't know of this species moving much outside its breeding range except for a few records in southern California; hopefully it will be a trend.

*John Ward*

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Kellner

Thick-Billed Kingbird

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**Species**

Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*)

**Number Seen**

1 - possibly first fall plumage.

**Date**

October 23, 1992

**Time**

17:55 - 18:25 MDT

**Location**

Waterton Canyon (Where the road forks, approximately 200 yards from the entrance gate.)

**County**

Jefferson County

**Other Observers Who Independently Identified This Bird**

Jack Reddall; 4450 South Alton; Englewood, Colorado 80111  
Doug Ward; Address not known.

**Optical Equipment**

Bausch & Lomb Criterian 4000 4-inch spotting scope (40X) and Zeiss 10x40 binoculars

**Weather Conditions**

Clear sky, slight haze; Wind, calm; Temperature 63F.

**Bird/Sun Orientation**

Sun had just set to my right; no direct sunlight on the bird.

**Distance From Bird and How Measured**

15 feet (estimated)

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Kellner

Thick-Billed Kingbird

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## Behavior and Demeanor

The bird was first seen perched at the top of a tall leafless cottonwood tree. As I approached the tree the bird flew to the top of a scrub oak (which still had many brown leaves on it) and called twice. I climbed up the hill side and located the bird perched near the top in and amongst many brown leaves. The bird did not vocalize again and appeared to be roosting for the evening as it did not move except for turning its head towards me a few times. (The bird was facing right and slightly towards me.)

## Size of bird

About the size of a Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) maybe larger (no birds were nearby for comparison).

## Head & Neck

Forehead and auriculars black; crown appeared dark when the bird turned its head, but was not clearly seen as leaves obscured it during most of the observation period.

## Eyes & Lores

Eyes black; a black cap started at the midpoint of the lower mandible, extended through the lores, went under the eyes and ended slightly wider at the rear of the auriculars.

## Lower & Upper Mandibles

All black bill; thick at the base with a small hook at the tip of the upper mandible (See Sketch #1).

## Legs & Feet

Legs and feet black.

## Upperparts

Grayish nape; grayish-green back.

## Rump

Not seen during observation.

## Uppertail coverts

Not seen during observation.

### Throat & Belly

Chin and throat white; white of throat extended back to back edge of black auriculars; white of throat and chin started at the midpoint of the lower mandible and extended down to about the shoulders, where a greenish wash separated the white throat from the medium yellow of the breast, belly and sides; faint yellow flanks; Noticed 2 or 3 black rictal bristles against the white color of the throat.

### Rectrices

A vast majority of the tail was obscured by leaves, the base of the tail was a medium brown color.

### Wings

Wings were brown; the lesser and median coverts had buffy-tan tips on them making the shoulder appear to have little "U" shaped markings (See Sketch #2); the greater coverts were edged and tipped with tan thus creating a plainly visible wing bar; Tertiaries, primaries and secondaries had very thin buffy-tan edges.

### Vocalizations

The bird called twice from near the top of the dense scrub oak; Sound was reminiscent of part of a Western Kingbirds call only much louder and deeper in pitch (Pa-Dă-Rēt).

### Habitat

Mouth of a relatively wide riparian canyon; the canyon narrows to near vertical rock walls approximately 1 mile farther upstream; many tall cottonwoods along the bottom of the canyon entrance with scrub oak along the sides of the canyon.

### Elimination of Similarly Appearing Species

Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) -

Gray crown; throat light gray not distinct and white; bill small and slender not massive; call higher pitched.

Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) -

Crown dark gray not black; throat not as extensively white; bill small and slender; auricualars dark gray not black; white of throat does not extend back to rear of auricualars.

Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) -

Crown gray not black; auricualars dark gray not black, and contrast sharply with light gray crown. On Thick-billed Kingbird there is no sharp contrast between auricualars and crown; bill is long and narrow not short and massive; call is a series of twittering.

Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*) -

Dark gray auricualars contrast with light gray crown; bill short and thick at base coming to a point, not short, thick and stubby (rounded tip)- like a Thick-billed Kingbird's bill; white of throat does not extend back to rear of auricualars.

Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*) -

Nape black; bill very long and slender; wing coverts not tipped with tan or buff; underparts not rich yellow.

All other kingbirds were eliminated because most of the remaining kingbirds are essentially black and white and this bird was distinctly yellow on the underparts.

All *Myiarchus* flycatchers have very noticeable rust in their tails and wings; have relatively slender bills; are very pale yellow (except for Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*)); throats usually grayish; do not appear stocky like a kingbird can.

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Kellner

Thick-Billed Kingbird

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### Prior Experience With This and Similarly Appearing Species

Western Kingbird - Have seen thousands in Colorado in all plumages from birth to adult over the last eight years.

Cassin's Kingbird - Have seen approximately three dozen in Colorado and Arizona during the summers over the last four years.

Tropical Kingbird - Have never seen one.

Couch's Kingbird - Have never seen one.

Loggerhead Kingbird - Have never seen one.

*Myiarchus flycatchers* - Have seen three dozen in Colorado and Arizona over the last four years.

### References used in the preparation of this report

National Geographic Society "Field Guide to the Birds of North America" Second Edition.

This report was written from notes and sketches made during the observation.

### Observer making this report

Joey M. Kellner - 8612 West Hinsdale Place, Littleton, Colorado 80123

SIGNATURE: Joey M. Kellner

DATE 10-25-92

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HAZY SUN JUST SET 163°

~ 5:55 - 6:25 CALM

Ki Brd

Dirt White Throat, 3 whiskers black

yellow Breast &amp; Belly

Heavy Thick Bill <sup>hook</sup> Lesser curve tan tips

Curvous Buff Tan edges tips

Black cap

white of throat goes back to

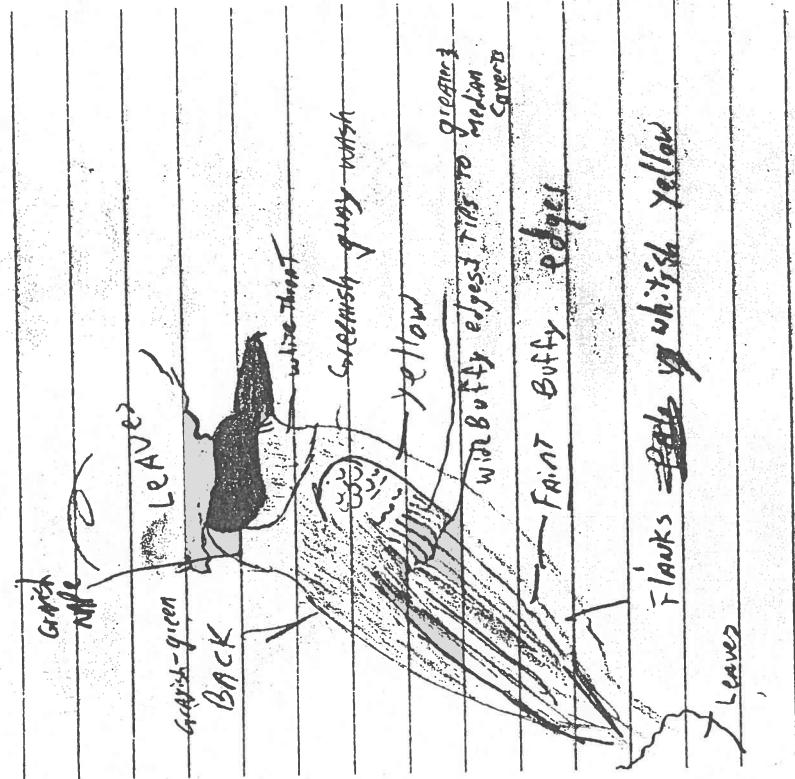
Back of auricular patch

grayish naope

wings dark brown

gray green back

Legs &amp; feet black

territorial song ~ 200 yds from pairing  
1st year is calls a wood to the right of the  
fork in field Roosted in scrub oak ~ 15 feet  
awayslight  
looked larger than we KI  
Chubbier - "thick bodied"

original field  
sketches

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Thick-Billed Kingbird

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