

ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Animal Abstract

Element Code: ABPAE52010

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**CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE**

**NAME:** *Tyrannus melancholicus*

**COMMON NAME:** Tropical Kingbird, Couch's Kingbird, West Mexican Bird, Lichtenstein's Kingbird, Olive-backed Kingbird

**SYNONYMS:**

**FAMILY:** Tyrannidae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** Viellot, Nouv. Dict. Hist. Nat., nouv. Ed., vol. 35, Dec. 1819, p. 84. (Paraguay.)

**TYPE LOCALITY:** Fort Lowell, Tucson, Cochise County, AZ.

**TYPE SPECIMEN:** Kimball 5-12-1905, (MCZ).

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** Populations in Arizona and western Mexico sometimes have been treated as a separate species, *T. occidentalis* (West Mexican Kingbird), but the latter is not distinguishable from the wide-ranging Middle American subspecies of *T. melancholicus* (Sibley and Monroe 1990, AOU 1998 in NatureServe 2002). *T. melancholicus* and *T. couchii* have been regarded as conspecific by some authors, but Traylor (1979, Auk 96:221-223 in NatureServe 2002) found them to be distinct species that are extremely sympatric.

**DESCRIPTION:** Large tyrant flycatcher with a relatively large bill and long, slightly notched tail. The overall length is 18.4-23.0 cm (7.2-9 in) and mass is 32-43 g. The top and sides of the head are gray with dusky auriculars and lores. They have a concealed reddish-orange crown-patch (smaller in female). The back and rump is grayish olive. The wings are dull brown or blackish, coverts edged gray and secondaries edged whitish. In males, the inner webs of the outer primaries are distinctly notched (females slightly so). The tail and uppertail-coverts are brownish black and slightly notched. Throat is grayish white, shading to pale gray on foreneck. The remaining underparts are yellow; chest tinged olive; bill and feet black. The sexes are similar except where noted above, and there is almost no seasonal change in plumage. Immatures closely resemble adults, but may be distinguished primarily by red feathers in crown reduced or lacking, and notches on all or most outer primaries lacking.

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** The Tropical Kingbird is most similar to the Couch's Kingbird (*T. couchii*) and can best be identified by its different calls. Western and Cassin's Kingbirds (*T. verticalis* and *T. vociferans* respectively) are similar but lack dark cheeks and have less-forked

tails. Cassin's Kingbird has a darker breast. Western Kingbird has white outer tail feathers. Thick-billed Kingbird (*T. crassirostris*) usually has whiter underparts and has a darker head. Brown-crested, Ash-throated and Dusky-capped Flycatchers (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*, *M. cinerascens*, *M. tuberculifer* respectively) are somewhat similar but have darker, browner crowns and unforked tails.

**ILLUSTRATIONS:**

Color photo (Hull in <http://www.mangoverde.com/birdsound/picpages/pic116-401-1.html>).

Color photo (Danzenbaker in <http://www.avesphoto.com/website/NA/species/KGBTRO-1.htm>).

Color photo (LaTourrette in <http://www.birdphotography.com/species/trki.html>).

Color picture (Peterson 1990).

Color picture (National Geographic 1999).

Color picture (Sibley 2000).

Color picture of egg (Baicich 1997).

**TOTAL RANGE:** Breeds: southeastern Arizona (uncommon and local), south through portions of Mexico and Central America south to central Peru, Guianas, and central Argentina. Northern Winter: Sonora and northeastern Mexico south through breeding range, very rarely to Pacific Coast.

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** San Bernardino NWR and San Pedro River, Cochise Co.; Arivaca Creek, Avra Valley, Quitobaquito Hills (Organ Pipe Cactus NM), and Santa Cruz River, Pima Co.; Gila and San Pedro Rivers, Pinal Co.; Santa Cruz River, Sonoita Creek, and Sopori Wash/Tumacocori Mts., Santa Cruz Co.

**SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS**

**BIOLOGY:** Their voice is twittering trills. This species is one of a group of Mexican birds that make a post-breeding reverse migration in the late summer and fall northward along the Pacific Coast (ENature 2003). It is as aggressive against intruders like the great kiskadee and will chase after big birds like the yellow-headed caracara. Adults have been taken by Aplomado Falcons in Mexico. Swallow-tailed Kites and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans depredate eggs and nestlings.

**REPRODUCTION:** Breeding seasons: March-July in Costa Rica, April-July in Mexico and May-June in Arizona. The Tropical Kingbird usually nests in horizontal branch of a tree 2-12 m (usually below 4.5m) up, but may be as high as 70ft. above ground, also in shrubs, sometimes low above water. The nest is a shallow bowl-shaped structure of dry twigs, rootlets, and weed stems, grasses, lined with finer materials. The female performs nest building. She lays usually 2-5 eggs. They are sub elliptical to long sub elliptical. The eggs are creamy white, boldly marked with reddish-brown spots and streaks. 25 x 18 mm. The female incubates them for 15-16 days. The

nestlings are altricial, with the down being sparse and light gray, skin is pink. The inside of the mouth is orange. Both of the parents feed the young and they leave the nest at 18-19 days.

**FOOD HABITS:** Catches flying insects in the air; also picks insects off low vegetation or on ground. Frequently eats berries, plucked while perched or in flight.

**HABITAT:** Areas with scattered trees, savanna, open woodland, forest edge, plantations, residential areas and agricultural lands. Occurs in lowlands near water in Arizona, often nests in cottonwoods.

**ELEVATION:** 1,070 - 4,100 ft (326-1250 m) in AGFD HDMS unpublished records (accessed 3-6-2003).

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Unknown

**POPULATION TRENDS:** Unknown

## **SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION**

**ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS:** None  
**STATE STATUS:** WSC (AGFD, WSCA in prep)  
[Species of Concern, TNW AGFD 1988]  
**OTHER STATUS:** Not BLM Sensitive (USDI, BLM AZ 2010)  
[Bureau of Land Management Sensitive (USDI, BLM AZ 2008)]

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** Unknown

**PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:** Unknown

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:** Demographic studies are needed to determine traits such as age at first reproduction, mortality and longevity. Also, studies to determine how this species is able to coexist with 1-3 other *Tyrannus* species. Comparative studies of diet, foraging and microhabitat selection could help clarify the ecological relations of these species. In addition, the extent of hybridization between Tropical and Couch's kingbirds remains poorly known.

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP:** BLM - Tucson Field Office; FWS - San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge; NPS - Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument; TNC - Cascabel Community Management Area and Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve; Private.

## **SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

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### **MAJOR KNOWLEDGEABLE INDIVIDUALS:**

### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

**Revised:** 2003-03-07 (AMS)

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