

Gray Kingbird

Tyrannus dominicensis

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DESCRIPTION

Taxonomy and Basic Description

The gray kingbird was first described by Gmelin in 1788. Since then, a subspecies, *T. D. dominicensis*, has been described. The gray kingbird is one of the flycatchers and eats insects and some fruits. It is approximately 23 cm (9 inches) in length and weighs 44 g (1.55 ounces). The upperparts are gray while the underside is white. A reddish crown patch is also present, though hard to detect. Cheeks and tail are gray. Unlike the eastern kingbird, a close relative that is more common in South Carolina, the gray kingbird's tail is forked and does not have a white terminal band (Sauer et al. 2000).



Status

The gray kingbird is a peripheral species in South Carolina and is not ranked in this state. It is, however, considered imperiled (S2) in Georgia and Alabama and vulnerable (S3) in Mississippi (NatureServe 2004). The global rank for the species is secure (G5) (NatureServe 2004), although it is a regional priority species in the southeast (C. Hunter, pers. comm.). Southeastern populations are locally migratory (NatureServe 2004) with the majority of the gray kingbird's range and population (90 percent) being in south Florida (Florida Keys) and the West Indies (Cely 2003; C. Hunter, pers. comm.). Florida's Breeding Bird Atlas states that the Florida population, though unranked, is stable at this time (Rowe 2003).

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION AND SIZE

Sauer et al. (2000) asserts that the species used to breed along the South Carolina coast down to its present-day Florida range and west to Mississippi. The last published breeding record in South Carolina was on Sullivan's Island in 1893 (Cely 2003). Other sightings in fairly recent years include a pair seen on Fripp Island during the breeding season in May 1984 and a pair with a fledgling at Debidue Beach in Georgetown County in 1993 (Cely 2003). It is possible that some birds are breeding along the South Carolina coast as individuals have been seen periodically during the breeding season (Cely 2003).



HABITAT AND NATURAL COMMUNITY REQUIREMENTS

The gray kingbird is mostly found in the coastal zone in open habitats such as woodlands (hardwood and mixed), scrub-shrub wetlands and old-field situations (NatureServe 2004). In Florida, mangroves are also utilized (NatureServe 2004). The birds typically nest 1.2 to 3.7 m (4 to 12 feet) above the ground in oaks or mangroves, often overhanging water (Rowe 2003).

CHALLENGES

The gray kingbird may be facing special challenges as many coastal habitats are being lost to development. However, it has been proposed that the species is adaptable to the urban landscape in its restrictive Florida range and may, therefore, be stable in areas where it is common (Rowe 2003). The gray kingbird is on South Carolina's priority species list because it needs more study in this state.

CONSERVATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

There are no conservation accomplishments that specifically address the gray kingbird, as this species is marginal in terms of breeding in South Carolina (Post and Gauthreaux, Jr. 1989). It has been considered to be more of a visitor than a true species of concern here in South Carolina (C. Hunter, pers. comm.). However, several coastal Heritage Preserves are most likely providing habitat for this species in South Carolina. Some of these include Capers Island Heritage Preserve, Old Island Heritage Preserve and St. Helena Sound Heritage Preserve. In a recent study of hammock islands in South Carolina, no gray kingbirds were detected (McCord et al. 2004).

CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct constant effort surveys in appropriate habitats along coastal South Carolina to determine if any populations of gray kingbirds are nesting in the state.
- Enlist the cooperation of local birders in reporting breeding for the gray kingbird.
- Determine species habitat requirements and initiate management regimes to help bolster gray kingbird populations.
- Determine to what extent gray kingbird life history data established by Smith and Jackson (2002) should prove useful for South Carolina populations.
- Monitor any effects of habitat conversions on existing populations of gray kingbirds.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

As the aforementioned surveys yield results on presence/absence data, life history traits, and habitat requirements, conservation actions can be further developed.

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