

COLUMNISTS

Scissor-tailed flycatchers are aerial acrobats

Carisse Mickey Berryhill Special to the Reporter-News

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If you pass by a fenced pasture with scattered trees and shrubs on a summer day, you may see a slender, light gray bird with dark wings perched on the fence or a telephone line. Suddenly, the bird launches into the air, flaring out its wings and – surprise! – a forked, black and white tail stretching longer than its body.

To pursue an airborne insect, the bird dives and darts, snatching it midair, then returns to its perch.

This aerobic predator is a scissor-tailed flycatcher, *Tyrannus forficatus*, one of Texas' most distinct and entertaining summer birds. They live in open country here, with habitats as far north as Kansas City and throughout western Missouri, central Arkansas and western Louisiana.

Males, with their incredible tails, arrive in our area the last week of March or first week of April. I know spring has arrived when I see one. Scissor-tailed flycatchers are aerial death for flying insects, so these birds spend the spring and summer here and migrate in October to Mexico and Central America like other insect-eaters.

After females arrive in spring, they pair off and build a cup-shaped nest in a tree near a golf course or pasture. They can shade their young but still scour the open for grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and flying insects. Females are similar in color to males but have shorter, but still dramatic, forked tails. They'll occasionally also feed on wild berries.

If you get a lucky look at an adult scissor-tail in flight, you might see a brilliant orange shoulder patch. They also have gorgeous salmon pink flanks and underbellies. Scissor-tailed flycatchers sound like a squeaky toy when they sing. They also bicker with a rickety, cranky noise, like me before my morning coffee.

Not every flycatcher in our area is a scissor-tail – there are four or five other flycatcher cousins who breed here and several who pass through during migration. All of them perch alertly and watch for bugs, swooping out in a loop to nab the bugs with their beaks and return to their hunting perches. But only scissor-tails have that amazing tail.

If you see a flycatcher with a dark back and wings, a yellow belly and an ordinary black tail sided with white, that's a western kingbird. You are more likely to see one in your neighborhood in the top of a tree or on the electric line above your alley.

Scissor-tails have a more “don't fence me in” preference for cemeteries, campuses, grasslands with brush and golf courses. The requirements are open land with bugs, an elevated perch to scan the grass, and a few trees for nesting and hunting. And plenty of room for their gorgeous tails.

You can read more about scissor-tailed flycatchers online at ebird.org/species/sctfly or at allaboutbirds.org/guide/Scissor-tailed_Flycatcher/overview. These sites provide descriptions, photos, sound recordings, range maps, and observation maps, even down to the county level.

Carisse Mickey Berryhill is a Texas Master Naturalist, Big Country Chapter. The Texas Master Naturalist program is a volunteer education and service organization sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Training classes for new members in Abilene are scheduled for next spring. For information, go to txmn.tamu.edu or the BCTXMN Facebook page.