

## Fork-tailed flycatcher thought to be at least 1,700 miles off course

BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS—April 9, 2008—The rare fork-tailed flycatcher sighted at The Nature Conservancy's Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve during March was at least 1,700 miles outside of its range, according to bird experts, who aren't certain why some birds, called "vagrants," stray so far.

Called an "austral migrant" by ornithologists – meaning it both breeds and migrates within the Southern Hemisphere – the subspecies of fork-tailed flycatcher seen at Southmost Preserve breeds in the temperate latitudes of South America and typically migrates northward toward the Amazon basin for the winter (which is summer in the Northern Hemisphere).

Based on photos and videos taken by Southmost Preserve manager Max Pons and Nature Conservancy geographer Malcolm Swan, the bird was identified as a male and, particularly interesting, most likely a member of a subspecies of fork-tailed flycatcher, *Tyrannus savanna savana*, which is not normally found north of Brazil. In other words, this bird was even further off course than other fork-tailed flycatchers that migrate as far north as Central America.

Ornithologist Chris Butler, Ph.D, who first identified the bird, noted that while scientists don't know definitively why birds sometimes turn up hundreds of miles or more outside of their normal range, some birds, including fork-tailed flycatchers, have a history of vagrancy.

"There is a precedent for these flycatchers to be vagrant over long distances," he said. "Instead of moving south for the winter, some may even move north. Their innate sense of where they should go for the winter becomes confused. My speculation is that this genus – *Tyrannus* –genetically prone to getting its directions mixed up."

Coincidentally, at the same time the fork-tailed flycatcher was visiting Southmost Preserve, another one was sighted in Texas around the Sabine River on the border with Louisiana near the Gulf Coast.

The fork-tailed flycatcher seen at Southmost Preserve was first sighted on March 30. His whereabouts now are uncertain. "We don't know what happens to most vagrants," Butler said. "They may move back south, they may move farther north."

Swan, whose high-speed video recording is helping to determine the subspecies of the bird, analyzes geographical and biological data for the Conservancy and is a zoologist by training. He has been an avid birder for 45 years.

"This bird represents what is extraordinary about nature in general," he said. "It's a pretty bird, yes, but it makes us think, too. For some people, just seeing the bird was a thrill – the species is very rare in the U.S., and the preserve, like most parcels of Rio Grande habitat, lies south of the proposed Mexico border fence. For others, the likelihood that the bird accidentally wandered north over 1,700 miles beyond its intended wintering grounds in South America boggles the mind."