

Healthy habitat, abundant water may have drawn rare bird to nature preserve

BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS—April 9, 2008—Located along a meandering bend of the Rio Grande at the southernmost tip of Texas, The Nature Conservancy's 1,000-acre Southmost Preserve protects nearly impenetrable stands of native Tamaulipan thorn brush along with one of the last sabal palm forests remaining in the United States. The preserve is part of the Boscaje de la Palma region of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Corridor connecting several protected natural areas along the Rio Grande.

Positioned within major flyways of migratory birds, Southmost Preserve provides native habitat for Rio Grande Valley bird specialties, including Altamira oriole, chachalaca, green jay, tropical parula, buff-bellied hummingbird, black-bellied and fulvous whistling duck, groove-billed ani, Couch's kingbird olive sparrow and two rare subspecies, the Brownsville common yellowthroat and the Lomita Carolina wren.

Southmost offers habitat to other rare, threatened or endangered species, including the Southern yellow bat, Texas tortoise and Coue's rice rat. The speckled racer, a rare snake, has been sighted on the preserve, as has the black-spotted newt. Ocelot and jaguarundi have been reported on occasion in this area. Rare amphibians, such as the sheep frog, Mexican white-lipped frog and Rio Grande lesser siren, are dependent on the preserve's resacas, or oxbow lakes.

Preserve manager Max Pons, a wildlife biologist, speculates that those oxbow lakes may have been what attracted a rare fork-tailed flycatcher to Southmost during the unusually dry and windy conditions that prevailed while the bird was present.

"I think he was attracted first to the healthy habitat in the immediate vicinity, then was attracted specifically to Southmost because it's very dry in the region and the resacas at Southmost have good, clear water," said the Conservancy's Pons. "That makes for healthy insect populations. We had mayflies in the mornings and pompilid wasps in the afternoons. When it was unusually windy, he would perch on the reeds above the water in the resaca for protection."

To benefit wildlife, the Conservancy periodically pumps water into the resacas at Southmost from the nearby Rio Grande – a practice that is likely to cease if a 16- to 18-foot concrete Mexico border wall is constructed north of the border as planned by the Department of Homeland Security.

Pons pointed out that the fork-tailed flycatcher used a range of habitat at the preserve, both native and manmade. "He perched on the native plant nursery seed tables, the power line, in the butterfly garden," he said. "We'd see him sitting on the tips of the tepeguaje trees and other native trees and shrubs we planted to restore the habitat here. Sometimes he would fly away to the denser brush on the edge of the resaca."

Ornithologist Chris Butler, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, was studying birds at Southmost with his students when the fork-tailed flycatcher arrived there, and was the first to identify the rare visitor. He stressed that the native wildlife habitat found at the Conservancy's Southmost Preserve and at other nearby public and private wildlife sanctuaries is precious, not just for its high quality but for its rarity amid the Valley's cities and its agricultural lands.

"The Rio Grande Valley has been enormously impacted by people," he said. "Ninety to 95 percent of the original habitat has been modified. The five or so percent that's left is there along the Rio Grande. It's an area incredibly rich in biological diversity, but it's hugely important economically as well."

He cites a report from the Houston Advanced Research Center indicating that eco-tourists generate between \$100 million and \$170 million a year in revenue in the Valley. "One reason they come is that rare birds like the fork-tailed flycatcher turn up there along with the resident species," he said. "People will come from across the country or other countries to see these birds."

But the ecological value of this habitat is incalculable. The ornithologist's purpose in coming to Southmost from Oklahoma with his students was to study another unusual bird, the Brownsville common yellowthroat, a subspecies of the common yellowthroat in the warbler family that is found only around Brownsville, with a total population of 200 to 250 individuals.

During the summer, Dr. Butler says he has identified as many as 26 singing males of this subspecies at Southmost Preserve. "That means that if those males find mates here, as much as a quarter of the subspecies lives at Southmost Preserve, so this is tremendously important habitat for the Brownsville common yellowthroat," he said.