

Variation of wingbars in some tyrannid flycatchers

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This article explores the identification challenges posed by individual and seasonal variation in wingbars within selected tyrant-flycatchers.

It is usual for illustrators using museum specimens of birds to select a good quality specimen that is representative of the species from the area covered by the article or book they are working on, and use that as their basic reference. Occasionally, an artist will paint what is effectively a composite of several specimens, a perfect head from one, wings from another, and so on. Unfortunately what may well be a perfect, typical bird will not represent all the different plumages that a given species may have. In some families, the variation of plumage that comes from age, combined with different seasonal plumages, such as with gulls, is well known. In others, there are sometimes morphs among younger birds, but fewer (sometimes none) among adults, as is the case with some raptors. These essential differences are sometimes illustrated in identification guides, and indeed in the better specialist books, exhaustively so (e.g., Ferguson-Lees *et al.*², Malling Olsen & Larsson³). The variations that may be found within many passerine families are far less known and usually very poorly documented, let alone illustrated. There are glorious exceptions (e.g., Alström *et al.*¹ and Shirihai *et al.*⁶) but these really are exceptions to the rule—and explicitly do not cover Neotropical birds. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the majority of handbooks fall woefully short of full visual coverage.

During the time I spent on research for the plates of tyrannid flycatchers for *Birds of Northern South America*⁴, I was fortunate in being able to study a significantly large series of specimens. This close perusal actually complicated matters for me, rather than simplifying them. It usually revealed that there is far more variation within almost any given population of almost any species than I, and I suspect most people, imagine, and I felt a compulsion to paint them all! My purpose was to illustrate as many distinct races as I could,

but I was somewhat restricted (for many reasons) in the number of plumage variants I had before me that I could illustrate.

The most dramatic difference I found was that in many flycatchers, the number of wingbars varied according to whether the plumage was fresh or worn. Physical wear is always a factor, of course, and experienced birders are usually aware of its effect, at least in principle. But in the case of pale tips to the coverts and edges of tertials, there is another factor involved. It appears that the actual substance of this part of the feathers is weaker, and they disintegrate regardless of wear. The wingbars on flycatchers are always featured in both illustrations and text of all field guides as field marks—often key ones—in identification. The purpose of this article is to take a sample of species from across the Neotropics and show in each case how the wear and loss of these field marks can change the appearance of the bird significantly. In doing so, I underline the need to learn to recognize the full jizz of each species, and the full combination of characteristics that are necessary to identify a bird correctly.

I must stress that in every case in these notes, I have illustrated individual specimens. I have no idea what percentage of the wild population each individual might represent. In my experience with

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Figure 1. Tyrannid flycatchers with and without wingbars (Robin Restall)

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series of specimens in museum collections, these 'birds-without-bars' are uncommon. Thus I infer they are less likely to be seen in the field, and so less likely to be correctly identified. I restrict my comments to the wingbars, but please note that the illustrations may show other differences between the individuals, particularly those of the same subspecies. The main point of this paper is that variation in the appearance of wingbars can cause quite serious confusion (see 4, below, for example), and provoke worthwhile discussion.

Numbers/letters below refer to numbers/letters on the accompanying plate (Fig. 1).

1. Northern Scrub Flycatcher *Sublegatus arenarum*

(a) This bird is a grey morph of race *arenarum* from Costa Rica, in fresh plumage, and was collected in February. Note how there are two very distinct wingbars, with a faint third bar on the lesser coverts, the outer edges of the greater coverts are boldly white, the edges of the tertials are white, and the secondaries are edged white for all but the basal part. (b) Further south, this is another specimen of *arenarum*, a yellow morph in worn plumage, also taken in February. Note how the wingbars have worn at the same rate, leaving the middle one (on the median coverts) slightly bolder, which seems to be a characteristic of the species. The tertials have worn to an elegant point. (c) An adult of the race *glaber* from Trinidad, in fresh plumage, taken in October. It is interesting to see the difference in the way the white appears on the lesser and median coverts. (d) A similar bird, an April female, also *glaber* from Venezuela, in worn plumage. (e) And in contrast, another female *glaber* from French Guiana, a yellow morph, in very worn plumage.

2. Southern Scrub Flycatcher *Sublegatus modestus*

(a) A bird of race *modestus* from Argentina, in fresh plumage (September). Note the three wingbars and in particular how the middle bar is quite solid white. (b) Another *modestus*, also from Argentina, but in well-worn plumage (date illegible, I think it is November). Note how the small bar on the lesser coverts has effectively disappeared.

3. Sierran Elaenia *Elaenia pallatangae intense*

These birds are from Peru. (a) The two white wingbars are very cleanly defined and the tertials have large yellow patches on the distal outer webs. (b) A bird in rather worn plumage, and the two wingbars have almost entirely disappeared. Note how the tertials have worn.

4. Highland Elaenia *Elaenia obscura sordida*

These specimens are from north-east Peru and southern Ecuador. (a) The bird here is in fresh plumage, showing well the character of the white end tips to the median and greater coverts. In this plumage there are pale tips to the lesser coverts that almost form a wingbar, and in some individuals may well do so. Mark Pearman (*in litt.* 2007) made a very interesting comment about this bird when he saw Fig. 1, based on personal observations of a few hundred birds in the field, and 14 museum specimens. He pointed out that in Ecuador and north-east Peru, the subspecies involved should be nominate *obscura*, which is the same race found in the yungas of Bolivia and Argentina and doesn't look like this. He then referred to the illustration in Ridgely & Greenfield⁵. Mark considers that my illustration looks like the race *sordida* of south-east South America and asks if the specimen could be wrongly identified. The birds are in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and are unlikely to be misidentified—but such things are always possible. (b) In worn plumage the bird retains the white bars, albeit in a much thinner form. I did not find any birds that had lost the bars completely. Note how the yellow edging to the secondaries has worn, leaving only the inner part, which is whiter.

5. White-crested Elaenia *Elaenia albiceps chilensis*

(a) A well-differentiated race from the Patagonian forests of Chile and Argentina—the birds here are from Chile. Note the very clean, pure white nature of the wingbars and yellowish tone to the distal outer edges of the secondaries. Mark Pearman (*in litt.* 2007) pointed out that the secondaries here can be fringed with yellowish-white or white in fresh plumage, and the greater-coverts bar could be as broad or even broader than the median bar. (b) In worn plumage, this bird retains its wingbars but they have degraded to a fine, though still clear line. This could be confused with Small-billed Elaenia *Elaenia parvirostris*.

6. Gray Elaenia *Myiopagis caniceps*

This is a rather complex species with a great deal of plumage variation. There appear to be three different colour morphs, grey, green and yellow, and almost certainly intermediates; each with juvenile, immature and adult plumages, of which only the grey adult appears to be very well described and illustrated in the guides. The plumages of the entire species merit dedicated study. This is only a sample. (a) The first bird is an adult *caniceps* from Ecuador, in fairly fresh plumage (January) and I believe is the yellow morph. Note the first signs of wear visible at the tips of the greater coverts and tertials. I find it very interesting that the secondaries are edged yellow only on the distal half. (b) I think this is most likely an immature female (but it has been suggested it could be a juvenile) and the rufous flush is unusual. It is race *caniceps* from Argentina, shows slightly worn plumage, and was collected in January. Friends in Argentina were mystified by this bird, doubting the identity, but unable to offer an alternative. Note how the yellow edging to the tertials runs the full length of the feathers. (c) A green morph, from Brazil (July). Note how the upper wingbar has all but worn away. There is no pale edging on the secondaries at all. The specimen was unsexed. (d) A perfect adult male from Brazil, race *cinerea* (I have also seen an identical specimen from southern Venezuela). Note the generosity of white on all three bars, tertials and full secondaries. Almost too good to be true! (e) A juvenile *cinerea* from the northern borders of Colombia and Venezuela (January). Note how the tips of the wing-coverts form teardrops, not full edgings.

7. Plain-crested Elaenia *Elaenia cristata cristata*

All four birds shown here are from northern Venezuela. (a) This is a young bird, not easy to age in the field, but note the wingbars are not complete, and the edges of the secondaries are only pale on the distal half. (b) An adult bird in fine fresh plumage, two very broad and well-defined wingbars, buffy white, and with fully white outer edges of the tertials and secondaries. (c) This adult bird has partially worn wingbars, which are still apparent, but noticeably smaller than on bird (b). (d) An old bird in very worn plumage. In fact this bird had started to moult, and had fully-grown outer rectrices and the innermost (central) two pairs of secondaries, and innermost primaries, the second from outer rectrix was half grown. But

the tail is so worn that the central quill shone white. The wingbars are essentially gone and might not show in any form in the field.

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ERRATA

The first issue of *Neotropical Birding* contained two errors relating to photographic credits. On page 5, the photographer of Figure 2 was Dan Lane. On page 33, the Allpahuayo Antbird *Percnostola arenarum* was photographed by Noam Shany. The editorial committee apologises to the photographers concerned.