

Central Valley records of Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*)

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On the morning of 18 August 1983, while listening to the songs of Western Wood-Pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*) and Lazuli Bunting (*Passerina amoena*) near the little meadow area at the entrance to Durham Ferry County Park, San Joaquin City, San Joaquin County, DY heard a very plain, slurred, drawn out "pee-ah-wee" (song form 1 of McCarty [1996]) followed by a "wee-ur" (song form 2). It was heard just once and was rather far off, but it was so distinctively clear that DY felt it was either the full song of an Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) or a bird mimicking one. An extended visit the following morning failed to turn up anything, so it was let go as a tantalizing possibility. Several weeks later, on the morning of 5 September, DY again visited the area with Woody Kuen. The woodland was extremely busy with migrants, including at least 6 wood-pewees. Suddenly, one of the wood-pewees gave the full song that was heard on 18 August. It proceeded to give the song regularly at about 30 second intervals. The bird sat for long periods of time on exposed perches in tall cottonwoods, occasionally chasing other wood-pewees. In appearance, the bird on all accounts was nearly identical to a Western Wood-Pewee. It was a medium-sized flycatcher with the entire upperparts a medium brownish-olive. There were no noticeable facial details and there were two indistinct wingbars on the darkish wings. The primaries extended past the base of the tail. The tail was basically a dark brown. The breast area was dusky but was pale up the middle forming a slightly "vested" appearance. The rest of the underparts were off-white.

DY recalls how difficult it was to get in touch with other birders to discuss the possibility of the bird being an Eastern Wood-Pewee due to it being Labor Day weekend and the fact that many birders were out chasing Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) and Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) in Santa Cruz County. In addition, there was natural skepticism regarding a species that had only once been accepted in California by the California Bird Records Committee (hereafter CBRC; Luther 1980) due to the extreme difficulty of separating it from its close congener, Western Wood-Pewee. It wasn't until the morning of 7 September, when JML came down from Sacramento, that someone other than DY and Kuen concurred with the identification. JML got excellent tape recordings of the bird's vocalizations with his Sony TCM 5000 recorder and Sennheiser microphone and then proceeded to get the word out to the birding world at large. Birders descended on the area en mass starting on 9 September; fortunately the bird remained and vocalized until at least 17 September. The bird was eventually



Figures 1 and 2. Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) along the American River Parkway, Sacramento, Sacramento Co., 22 June 2003. Note the pale lower mandible.



photos by Gil Ewing

accepted as the second record of Eastern Wood-Pewee for California by the California Bird Records Committee (Morlan 1985). Sonograms made from tape recordings of the full song by JML are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Nearly 20 years later, at about 0715 on 22 June 2003, JML took his two dogs out for a walk behind his home near the Gristmill Access Area of the American River Parkway, Sacramento, Sacramento County, and heard the distinctive, slurred “pee-ah-wee” of an Eastern Wood-Pewee that is very different from the harsh, buzzy “peeer” of Western Wood-Pewee (McCarty 1996). Having just returned three days earlier from leading his 18th VENT tour to Manitoba, where he had heard Eastern Wood-Pewees, the song was fresh in his mind. With adrenaline pumping, he ran toward the large trees at the edge of the American River from which the song had come. Rounding the corner, he heard the diagnostic “pee-ah-wee” again and this time it was followed by the diagnostic, plaintive “wee-ur.” It took about a minute to locate the bird. JML’s first impression was that the bird seemed on the pale side for a Western Wood-Pewee. Its slightly crested appearance, lack of a distinct eye-ring, two indistinct wing-bars, and nearly completely orangish/yellow lower mandible were also noted. Pyle (1997) shows a range of lower mandible colors for which the two extremes may be species specific. The Sacramento individual appeared to have the extremely pale variant shown for Eastern Wood-Pewee.

After placing about 15 phone calls, JML grabbed his Sony TCM 5000 recorder and Sennheiser microphone and headed back to the river. The bird was not in the tree where he had seen it and was not singing. After what seemed like 10 minutes, it sang again a short distance away. Over the next couple of hours, JML was able to get 21 recordings of the “pee-ah-wee” song and 4 of the “wee-ur” song. There were two recently-fledged broods of American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) making a lot of noise during most of the observation/recording time, as well as some Yellow-billed Magpies (*Pica nuttalli*), American Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*), House Wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*), Nuttall’s Woodpeckers (*Picoides*

nutallii), and other species, which can be heard on the tape submitted to the CBRC and the Sacramento Bird Records Committee (SBRC).

Todd Easterla was the first birder to arrive. While JML taped some of the songs, Todd used JML's 20-60 zoom KOWA scope to study the bird and show it to others as they arrived. The bird began actively changing locations before the next group of birders arrived. Gil Ewing and Mark Fenner were able to get some photographs (Figures 1 and 2) and Cliff Hawley obtained some video footage.

JML kept taking people to the bird most of the morning and early afternoon as it slowly moved about 400 m downriver from its original location. Every place it tried to perch, an American Tree Swallow, Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*), House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) or other bird chased it off. JML last saw the Eastern Wood-Pewee with John Trochet and Keith Kwan at about 1400, straight in from the entrance to the Gristmill Access Area off Mira del Rio Drive. In spite of much searching by JML, John Sterling, Shawn Hayes, and others on the 23 June, the bird was not relocated. On 22 June, the weather was sunny and balmy all day and most birders had excellent and prolonged looks at this bird. Because we believe the most definitive way to identify this species is by song, JML put all his efforts into getting good recordings rather than obtaining a feather-by-feather description of this individual.

It is interesting to compare sonograms (Figures 3 and 4) of the Sacramento County Eastern Wood-Pewee, the San Joaquin County bird, and those used to illustrate the two-parts of the full song in McCarty (1996).

Statewide, Eastern Wood-Pewee is an exceedingly rare vagrant (Small 1994), with many records submitted to the CBRC being placed in the "Rejected, identification not established" category (Table 1). The 22 June 2003 record discussed in this article has been submitted to the CBRC.

It is widely believed that only a specimen will suffice for certain identification of a non-singing Eastern Wood-Pewee (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Dunn and Garrett 1983, McCarty 1996), but Pyle (1997) states that the current measurements and formula used to identify specimens will only identify ~97.5% of them, regardless of age, sex, and season. There were only two accepted records of Eastern Wood-Pewee when the Garret and Dunn (1981) and Roberson (1980) books were published, and since that time one of those (CBRC 27-1975-3,9) has been moved to the "Rejected, identification not established" category. The other (CBRC 88-1977-4) remains as California's first accepted record. Roberson (1980) discussed the difficulty in morphologically separating the two species and in Roberson (2002) goes into considerable discussion about the two records submitted to the CBRC from Monterey County. He raises a question about usefulness of the prolonged bouts of "chipping" that are characteristic, during fall migration, of Eastern Wood-Pewees but not of Western Wood-Pewees. Veit and Peterson (1993) indicate that migrating Eastern Wood-Pewees in the fall utter a subsong that can be used for positive identification. In his *Field Guide to*

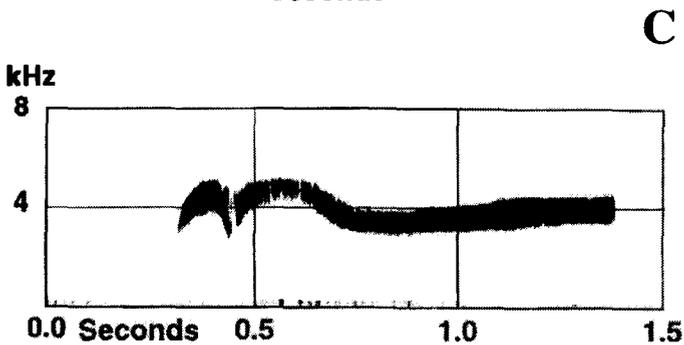
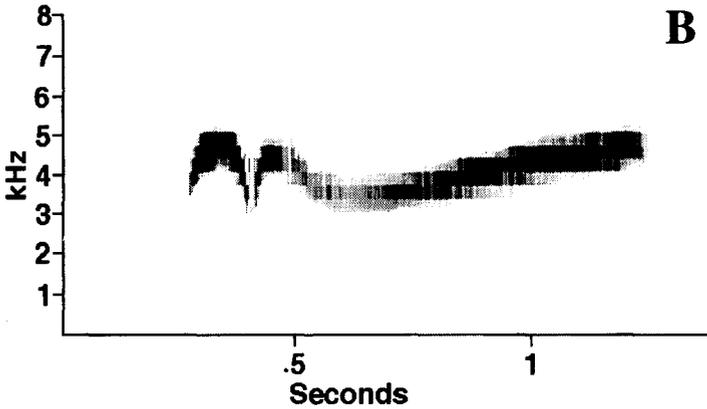
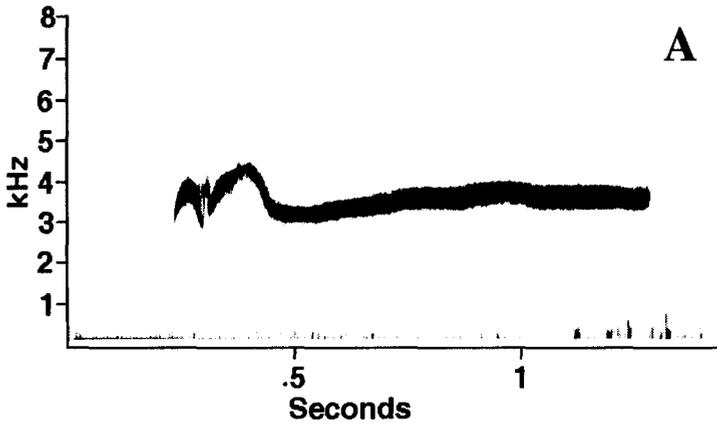


Figure 3. Songrams of Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) "pee-ah-wee" (song form 1) recorded: (A) in San Joaquin County on 7 September 1983 by Jeri Langham; (B) in Sacramento County on 22 June 2003 by Jeri Langham, and (C) taken from McCarty (1996).

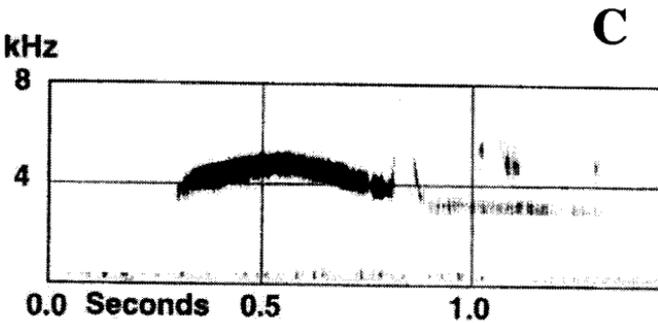
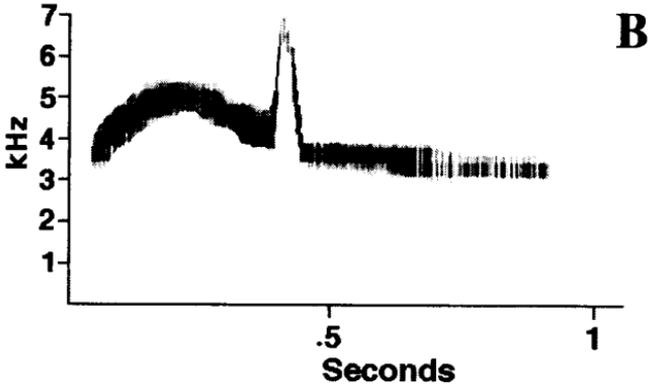
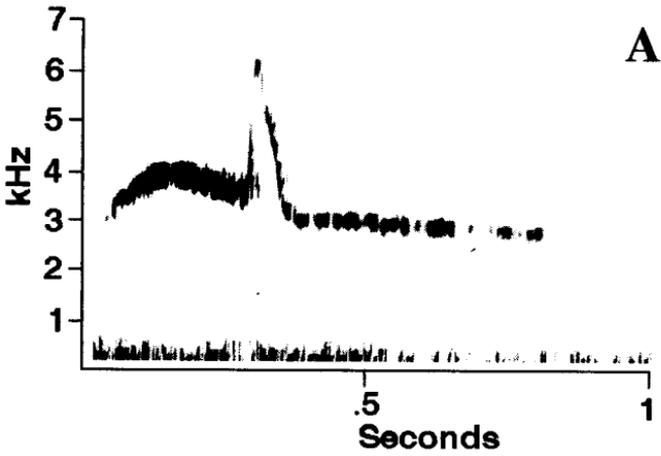


Figure 4. Songrams of Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) “wee-ur” (song form 2) recorded: (A) in San Joaquin County on 7 September 1983 by Jeri Langham; (B) in Sacramento County on 22 June 2003 by Jeri Langham, and (C) taken from McCarty (1996).

Advanced Birding, Kaufmann (1990) states that because the known visible differences between these two species are comparative, subtle and subject to variation, distinguishing them in the field by sight alone is probably impossible. McCarty (1996) also mentions that Tropical Pewee (*Contopus cinereus*) of Central and South America may also be difficult or impossible to separate from *C. virens* and *C. sordidulus*. Clearly, there is still much to learn about visually distinguishing these very similar species when they aren't singing, and it is likely that some records will be resubmitted as we learn more.

Table 1. Date(s), locations, and record numbers of Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) records "Accepted" and "Rejected, identification not established" by the California Bird Records Committee as of 2002 (California Bird Records Committee, in prep.).

ACCEPTED RECORDS

DATE(S)	LOCATION	CBRC RECORD #
15 June 1975	SE Farallon I. SF	88-1977-4 (photo)
18 Aug.-17 Sept. 1983	San Joaquin City SJ	60-1983-8 (photo, tape)
24 June-9 July 1994	Big Pine Mtn. SBA	111-1994-20 (tape)
31 Oct.-4 Nov. 1996	Huntington Beach ORA	155-1996
3 June 1998	Bodega Head SON	115-1998
22 June 1998	Pt. Reyes MRN	094-1998
4-8 July 1998	Mono L. County Park MNO	103-1998
10 June 1998	Galileo Hill KER	120-1998
27 June-9 July 1998	Kern R. Preserve KER	102-1998

REJECTED RECORDS, IDENTIFICATION NOT ESTABLISHED

DATE(S)	LOCATION	CBRC RECORD #
5 June 1969	Pacific Grove MTY	93-1976-5
18-19 Oct. 1974	Big Sycamore Canyon VEN	27-1975-3,9
18-26 May 1982	Pt. Loma SD	94-1982-8 (photo)
21 Oct. 1986	Cayucos SLO	26-1987-13
12-14 Dec. 1986	Carmel R. Mouth	457-1986-13 (photo, tape)
5 May 1991	Rancho San Carlos MTY	116-1992-18
29 Nov. 1994	Huntington Beach ORA	14-1995 (photo, tape)

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