

Western Kingbird (WK)

THIS COMMONLY SEEN fly catcher is a summer bird in Eldorado. In May and June of 2008, several residents watched a pair building a nest about 30 feet high in the center crook of the large cottonwood tree near the ECIA building.

The WK is 8.75 inches long with a wingspan of 15.5 inches. Its head is gray, its back is gray with tinges of yellow, and its tail is a slightly darker gray. A black line runs from eye to bill. Cheeks are white fading into gray. The belly is a bright sulfur yellow. In flight, the yellow belly is seen to extend on underwing axillaries (wing feathers close to the body and at the front of the wing). Females are slightly duller than males. These (and most) kingbirds have rictal bristles—stiff bristles pointing forward where the bill meets the head. Studies so far have not been able to discover the purpose of these bristles!

The WK prefers open areas with large trees. They often sit high on electrical lines or denuded branches, waiting for insects, which they "hawk" on the wing, using their broad, flat hooked bills. Some fruit

is also part of the diet. The song is a simple series of notes or alarm whistles. From lab studies, the song seems to be innate and is not learned. The Cassin's kingbird is less common, but can be seen here. It is similar but has very little white on its breast and wings, and its back is browner.

Pairs are (mostly) seasonally monogamous. Males perform frenetic courtship flights. The female lays and broods three or four eggs which hatch asynchronously in 18 or 19 days. The helpless young grow to fledge in 16 or 17 days. Parents stay with their young for another week or two (presumably the babies must develop the skill to catch insects on the fly).

WKs migrate during the night and spend winters in southern Mexico and western Central America.



—Pam Heintze