

Along The Trail

by

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Quite often, in our discussions of birds, people show amazement at learning that there are so many different kinds and they wonder how on earth one can learn to know them all.

Of course there are several factors which enter into the matter. To begin with, curiosity is the forerunner of knowledge as has been said many times. A person must first have a consuming interest. From that point on it is only a matter of application. One can learn a lot about any subject if he applies himself diligently.

In a little class which I conducted recently one of the newcomers came up with the old expression, "I don't know one bird from another — I don't know any birds." This obviously is an exaggeration, for most everyone knows a duck from a robin or a vulture from a sparrow, so that first of all we might assume the interest isn't present or the individual has a defeatist attitude.

Viewed individually, there are a lot of species, but if we learn our lessons and group birds into types, we appreciably reduce the number of groups. I was explaining, for instance, about the flycatchers. This group, aside from their structure has certain obvious habits in common.

All are insect eaters, but they do not search leaves or inspect bark like warblers or chickadees. They sit upon a perch from which passing insects can be seen then they launch out and snap up their food in the air.

Naturalists also are aware that the different species in this group forage at different heights. If one were to draw a chart of

the forage heights of all the flycatchers he would come up with something like this:

The say's phoebe feeds the lowest. At times a clod of dirt is adequate for a perch. Again he may choose a weed tip as is commonly seen on the beach at Natural Bridges in the winter.

The ash-throated flycatcher overlaps the say's phoebe in that he too forages from the tops of weeds and several times in spring I have seen this species in the field east of Natural Bridges.

The black phoebe comes into the picture about here. His is a special kind of habitat in that a lot of his foraging is done over water. He also feeds at low height over storm-tossed kelp on the beach.

The western flycatcher, of the woodland species, is a low level forager, but compared to the three above, he would be classed as intermediate. We see him feeding at around twenty feet, often from some alder or other low tree.

The western kingbirds have to come in here someplace as intermediate zone flycatchers, although they may feed from the top of a eucalyptus tree or from a telephone wire.

Back to the woodland flycatchers, the wood peewee goes a little higher than the western flycatcher and finally, the highest forage beat of all is that used by the olive-sided flycatcher who often feeds around the fifty or sixty foot level.

Now knowledge of this nature is good to have if one wants to learn birds. This type of information is one of the many different identification aids used by bird students.