



Species Spotlight

Eastern Wood Pewee

Contopus virens

2018 | YEAR OF
THE BIRD 

2018 marks the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, considered by many to be the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, National Geographic, the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and BirdLife International are joining forces with more than 100 other organizations, including the National Park Service, and millions of people around the world to celebrate 2018 as the “Year of the Bird.” As part of this celebration, NETN’s Species Spotlight series will focus on a different bird species each month throughout the year.

What is it?

The Eastern Wood Pewee is a relatively nondescript grayish-olive-white bird roughly the size of a sparrow. Long distance migrants, they spend the winter in wooded, partially cleared, and shrubby habitats in the Andes region of northern South America as well as Central America. For many birders in the Northeast, when its piercing call rings out over the forest, the end of the remarkable natural event of spring bird migration has been signaled. Perhaps not wanting to risk arriving before a plentiful supply of insects are readily available, Pewee’s are usually one of the last migrant species to arrive on their spring breeding grounds - usually mid-May or early June in our region. They are also one of the last migrants to leave for their wintering grounds in September after most other species have already left.

A Bird by Any Other Name

Much appreciated by beginning birders, the Pewee joins fellow flycatcher the Eastern Phoebe and other birds like Black-capped Chickadees that actually say their own name when they sing or call. The Eastern Wood Pewee’s loud and consistent “*pee-ah-weee!*” makes it easy to pick out among the calls of other birds during the dawn and dusk hours.

Pewees even continue to call well into the hot and humid dog-days of August. This is a time period where many other songbirds are silent since they are molting and trying to stay hidden from potential predators. Pewees, however, molt after fall migration. Another unique attribute of this songster is that in contrast to many other birds, the Pewee’s song is genetically imprinted on its brain, so it doesn’t have to be taught it by an adult. This also means that Eastern

Wood-Pewees lack any regional dialects that other songbirds acquire over time. So from New England to the Canadian maritime, and from Florida to Texas - their songs remains the same.

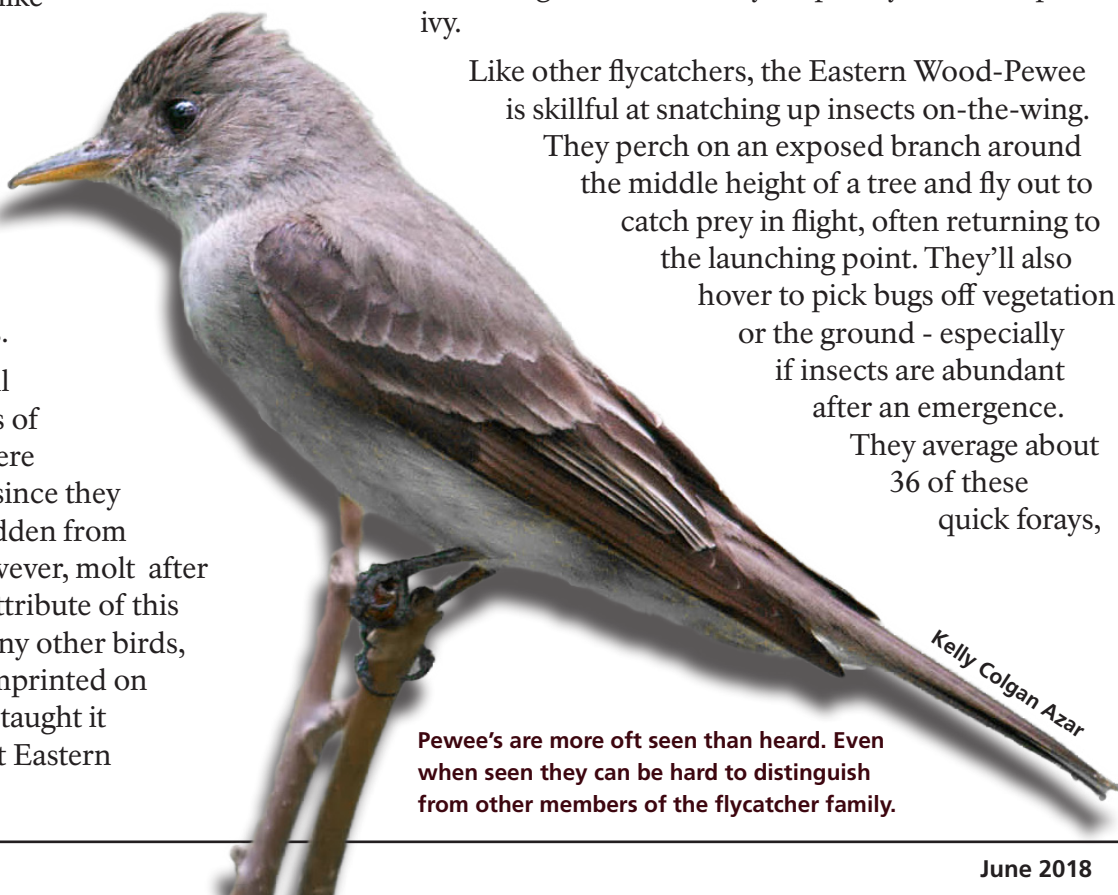
Nest-ling In

Pewee nests are even harder to spot than they are. The nest is often perched on a fork well out from the trunk of a tree on a horizontal thin limb, usually dead and sheathed in lichen. Small for the relative size of the bird and encrusted in lichen, the nest is attached to the branch by spider webs and sits anywhere from 20 to 60 feet up the tree.

Sally Forth and Prosper

The Pewee’s diet is a virtual cornucopia of crunchy critters - including beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, stoneflies, bugs, butterflies, moths, bees, wasps, and mayflies. On rare occasions, they’ll eat the berries and seeds of dogwood, blueberry, raspberry, and even poison ivy.

Like other flycatchers, the Eastern Wood-Pewee is skillful at snatching up insects on-the-wing. They perch on an exposed branch around the middle height of a tree and fly out to catch prey in flight, often returning to the launching point. They’ll also hover to pick bugs off vegetation or the ground - especially if insects are abundant after an emergence. They average about 36 of these quick forays,



Kelly Colgan Azar

Pewee’s are more oft seen than heard. Even when seen they can be hard to distinguish from other members of the flycatcher family.



Pewee nests are often placed in the fork of a dead tree branch and covered in lichen, making them hard to spot from ground-level.

or sallies, during non-breeding times of year. But with hungry chicks to feed, they really put the pedal-to-the-metal averaging almost 70 sallies per hour— sometimes snatching up several insects in one go.

In an unspoken agreement of vertical habitat niche assignments, different flycatcher species occupy and hunt in different layers of the forest canopy. Great Crested Flycatchers use a higher perch than Pewees, Acadian Flycatchers are lower, with Least Flycatchers perched lower still.

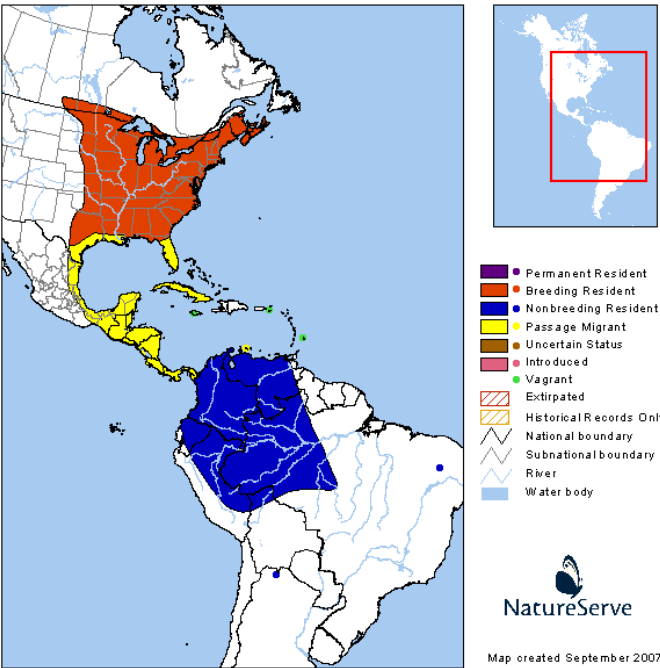
Degradation and Deer

Currently, Eastern Wood-Pewees are still considered to be a common bird across their range. But like many other neotropical migrant species, its population has declined in recent decades: by about 51% between 1966 and 2015 according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey.

Similar to other birds, some of this decline is likely due to loss and degradation of overwintering habitat in South America and stopover points in Central and South America. Habitat loss and degradation also takes place across its breeding grounds in North America, pinching these and other birds on both ends. Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 5.5 million, with

...there is no bird which compares with the Wood Pewee in sheer laziness of style; he does not attempt to 'hit' a note squarely, he reaches for it with all the sentimentality... of the inexperienced and uncultivated singer, capturing us in spite of his error by the perfect sweetness of his voice.

- F. Schuyler Mathews
Fieldbook of Wild Birds and Their Music



True to their name, Eastern Wood Pewees only breed east of the Mississippi River. Their wintering grounds do overlap with the closely related Western Wood Pewee however.

the vast majority, 94%, breeding in the U.S. and the other 6% in Canada. Another factor leading to their decreasing numbers may be the overabundance of white-tailed deer in the region. Eastern Wood-Pewees seek out forests with

dense understory growth, and intense deer browsing is leading to changes to this intermediate canopy level where the birds prefer to forage.

One factor in the bird's favor is that they appear to be tolerant of forest fragmentation since they can live in both edge habitat as well as forest interiors. They are also more flexible in habitat selection during the breeding season than other species that have

seen greater population declines than the Pewee. They can be found breeding in almost every type of wooded habitat in the eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada. Each year, young are successfully raised and fledged in mature woodlands, urban shade trees, along roadsides, in woodlots, and in fruit orchards.

For more information

-Listen to the Pewee's song: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Wood-Pewee/id.

- For info on NETN's long-term Breeding Landbird monitoring program see <http://go.nps.gov/landbirds>.

