

## STATUS OF COUCH'S KINGBIRD IN BELIZE

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Abstract.—The separation of *Tyrannus couchii* from *T. melancholicus* has been well demonstrated using characters from both external morphology and vocal repertoire. Distribution of the two taxa has been inferred from museum specimens and the area of sympatry is thought to include northern Guatemala (the Peten), Belize, and the Yucatan Peninsula (except Cozumel Island) in addition to Veracruz where the two forms have long been known to occur (Traylor 1979). We elaborate here on Traylor's few comments regarding the presence of *T. couchii* in Belize, reporting the first field sightings of the species as well as several additional specimens taken since his report.

### EL ESTATUS DE *TYRANNUS COUCHII* EN BELIZE

Resumen.—La separación de las especies *Tyrannus couchii* y *T. melancholicus*, ha sido bien documentada utilizando tanto características morfológicas como diferencias en la vocalización de estas aves. La distribución de ambas formas ha sido inferida mediante el estudio de pieles de museo y se cree que el área de simpatria de estas incluye el norte de Guatemala (Peten), Belize, la Península de Yucatán (excluyendo la isla de Cozumel) y Veracruz en donde se sabe que ambas especies conviven (Traylor 1979). En este trabajo se amplian los comentarios de Traylor (1979) y se discute el estatus de *T. couchii* en Belize basándose en observaciones de campo y la colección de especímenes.

Traylor (1979) examined the morphology of the Central American populations of Tropical Kingbirds (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) and agreed with Smith (1966) that the populations then assigned to *T. m. couchii* should be considered as belonging to a full species. He demonstrated consistent morphological differences between these two taxa in a combination of bill-length, wing-length, and wing-tip shape, even for specimens collected in areas of sympatry. This evidence, in conjunction with the differences in vocalizations described by Smith (1966) persuaded the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union to recognize both taxa as full species (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Traylor discussed the geographic distribution of these two species and included northern Guatemala and Belize within the area of sympatry.

Traylor did not mention, however, the absence of published records documenting the existence of *T. [m.] couchii* in Guatemala or Belize (or the southern Yucatan Peninsula); his inclusion of these areas in the range of *T. couchii* was based on a small number of specimens that matched the morphology of Mexican *T. couchii* (published sample sizes of five from northern Guatemala and three from Belize and southern Quintana Roo

combined). The purpose of this note is to comment on the status of Couch's Kingbird in Belize.

A sample of 21 "Tropical Kingbirds" was collected in Belize during two Carnegie Museum of Natural History expeditions in 1984 and 1985. Two of these were prepared as study skins and the remainder were either preserved in alcohol or saved as skeletons with an associated spread wing. These bring the total number of Belizean kingbird specimens (excluding *T. tyrannus*) to nearly 80 (Russell 1964, R. James [Royal Ontario Museum], pers. comm.) of which more than half show the characteristics needed to separate the species.

Of the 14 measurable Belizean kingbird specimens examined in 1978, Traylor (pers. comm.) identified two as *T. couchii*. Of the 19 measurable recent Carnegie (CM) specimens, three are clearly *T. couchii*: all three have very small bill-length to wing-length ratios ( $<0.14$ ) and long fifth primaries (relative to the tenth; wing-tip ratio  $>1.3$ ). We measured an additional 10 specimens not seen by Traylor (six from the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology [UMMZ], and four from the Royal Ontario Museum [ROM]); one is clearly *T. couchii* (bill- to wing-length ratio of 0.126 and wing-tip ratio of 1.30). Thus, 14% (6 of 43) of the "Tropical Kingbirds" collected in Belize are actually Couch's Kingbird.

Field identification of *T. couchii* can be made only through vocalizations. Paulson visited Belize in October 1987 and made observations in the areas between San Ignacio, Belize City, and Dangriga and on several of the Cays. Of the 67 kingbirds seen and heard, at least three were Couch's. Paulson has had considerable experience with both species in the Yucatan and we are confident of the identifications. Two of the Couch's Kingbirds were seen and heard at the Maya Mountain Lodge in San Ignacio; the third was found along the Hummingbird Highway about halfway between Belmopan and Dangriga.

*T. melancholicus* has been collected in all parts of Belize except the Chiquibul (southwest portion of the country west of the Maya Mountains). *T. couchii*, however, appears to be rare or absent from the southern forests, the southernmost record being from just northwest of Dangriga (CM-P-166043, immature male). Other specimen records are from Manatee Lagoon (CM-P-25074, immature male); Cayo District, Milepost 35 of the Western Highway (CM-A-4956, adult male); near Orange Walk (CM-A-4967, adult male); Cayo (UMMZ-70710, adult male); and Gallon Jug (Traylor, pers. comm.). Considering the habitat preferences of *T. couchii* in other parts of its range (it has been called the Thorn-Scrub Kingbird), we would expect it to be more common in the northeastern portions of Belize than elsewhere (none of the four ROM specimens from Rockstone Pond, however, is Couch's); much more ornithological work is needed in Orange Walk and Corozal districts.

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