



# Long Point Bird Observatory Rare Bird Report Form

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Rare bird reports are a valuable resource for documenting the natural history of birds. The most interesting details about rare birds are often embedded inside rare bird reports complete with all their lore. In order that any sight record or banding of a rare species can be confirmed for the historical record, it must be properly documented. LPBO cooperators are therefore asked to complete a form in every case when a rarity, any bird on **The Red List**, has been observed, or most importantly species that aren't on the list at all. **The Red List** consists of approximately 100 species that are considered rare in the Long Point and are highlighted in the Long Point Area Checklist found in *A Birding Guide to Long Point Area*. Each observer should prepare his/her description independently and preferably before consulting any field guides or other literature. Any Red List species should be immediately reported to LPBO staff, or the Long Point Bird Alert.

**PLEASE PRINT.**

**Species claimed:** Tropical Kingbird

**No. of birds:** 1

**Age:** Second Year

**Sex:** Unknown (see Figure 6)

**Date(s):** June 12, 2019

**Place:** Squire's Ridge, Long Point, Ontario

**Time(s) of Observation:** 6:30 am

**Who first saw the bird(s):** Aidan Place and Hannah Stockford

**Who first identified it:** Aidan Place

**Other observers (names and addresses):** None

**Any who disagree:** None as to identity as a Couch's/Tropical Kingbird. Likely some as to identity as a Tropical.

**Your previous experience with the species:** I have seen this species a number of times in South Texas, Southeast Arizona, as well as in Panama.

**Your previous experience with any closely similar species:** See below

**(a) Formerly:** I have encountered Couch's Kingbird in South Texas as well as the first Maryland record in Alleghany County, Maryland in 2014. In the west— specifically in Southeast Arizona, I have seen a large amount of Cassin's and Western Kingbirds which also have some potential for confusion with Tropical.

**(b) Same day:** Eastern Kingbirds and Great Crested Flycatcher are abundant and common respectively at this site. However, from the photos below this bird is clearly not either of those two species.

**Species present for comparison:** None

**Which were beside it for comparison:** None

**Distance from observer(s):** ~25m (70 feet). Observer was standing under tree in which it was perched.

**How measured:** Guesstimate

**Optical aids used:** Swarovski EL 8.5x42 binoculars

**Weather conditions (at time of observation):** Clear skies. A more precise record of the weather (and that of the previous days) exists in my Breeding Bird Census data sheets at the Long Point Bird Observatory.

**Visibility:**

**Cloud Cover:** Minimal

**Lighting:**

**Wind direction and speed:**

**Circumstances:**

Hannah Stockford and myself were performing a Breeding Bird Census at a plot along Squire's Ridge. We arrived at around 5:35 am and shortly thereafter encountered this kingbird. When it initially flew by briefly we thought it might be an Eastern Kingbird or Great Crested Flycatcher with color shifted by the early morning light. However, we waited around the area just to be sure. After maybe 10 or so minutes, we spotted the bird atop a nearby tree and were able to confirm it was a non-eastern 'yellow-bellied' kingbird. While the bird moved around a bit, we were quickly able to narrow it down to a Couch's/Tropical Kingbird and photos obtained supported Tropical. We stayed in the area for around four hours. In that time, the bird would shift around the clearing it was in and rotate between perches. It would occasionally disappear and not make another appearance for 45 minutes to an hour. When we left, it hadn't returned for well over an hour despite our searching the general area. During the entire period of observation, the bird never called or showed any particularly noticeable response to playback of either Tropical or Couch's Kingbird.

The bird was not re-found by a search team later in the day. I left Ontario for a week the following day (leaving the nearby Breakwater cabin unoccupied) and never saw it on subsequent Breeding Bird Censuses on Squire's after I returned.

**Description:**

**Give separate description for (a) in the field (b) in the hand. Include full measurements and wing formula with hand descriptions. Include reasons for the elimination of other species.**

(a) **Elimination of Other Kingbirds-** Among other field marks, the lack of contrasting white malar with dark grey head ruled out Cassin's Kingbird and a forked brownish (as opposed to black) tail without white outer rectrices rules out Western Kingbird. This leaves the commonly confused species pair of Couch's/Tropical Kingbirds.

**Couch's vs. Tropical-** While Couch's and Tropical Kingbirds are visually extremely similar species, there are a number of field marks on which they differ and, when taken together, can be used to separate the two species. The first of these is the depth of the notch in the tail, with Tropical showing a much more pronounced tail notch than Couch's. To be precise, Pyle lists the depth of the tail notch on Tropical as 8-15mm versus the 4-9mm of a Couch's—a subtle but significant difference in some cases. This is convincingly present on this individual which shows a pronounced tail notch in multiple photos. Figure 1 and Figure 2 below show the Long Point kingbird on the left and a photos of Couch's Kingbird in similar position on the right (Couch's photos from Macaulay Library). However, the deceptively Tropical-like notch on the rightmost photo in Figure 2 highlights why these field marks should be used with caution.



**Figure 1. A comparison of flight shots highlighting the depth of the tail notch. Long Point kingbird on the left, Couch's on the right (Macaulay Library).**



**Figure 2. Long Point bird on the left, Couch's Kingbird on the right and middle. These photos again illustrate the depth of the tail notch of the Long Point bird.**

Another field mark which differs between Couch's and Tropical Kingbird is their primary pattern. As described and diagramed in Pyle (page 253, Figure 166), P10 in Tropical falls short of P5 in length whereas Couch's shows the opposite arrangement. This field mark is again shown on the Long Point bird as illustrated in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3. Primary morphology of Long Point kingbird showing P10 falling short of P5.**

In Cornell's comparison of different kingbird specimens (linked in the references below), it is noted that Couch's has a longer primary projection than does Tropical. This strikes me as quite subtle in the field and I was unable to make much of a compelling argument when comparing my photos of the Long Point bird to Macaulay Library photos of Tropical and Couch's Kingbird.

The final field mark to separate these two species is the bill, which is longer and thinner in Tropical than in Couch's (which has a shorter and stouter one). As noted by Peter Pyle when he was asked to comment on this individual (a screenshot of his email is attached), the Long Point bird seems to show a bill on the smaller side of the range for Tropical (perhaps indicating a female). However, the individual in question still has a longer and thinner bill than can be seen on photos of Couch's (whose bill can appear positively stubby) from the Macaulay Library— another point in favor of Tropical. Figure 4 shows the length of the bill well and a good reference image for this field mark from Cornell's kingbird comparison is shown on the right.



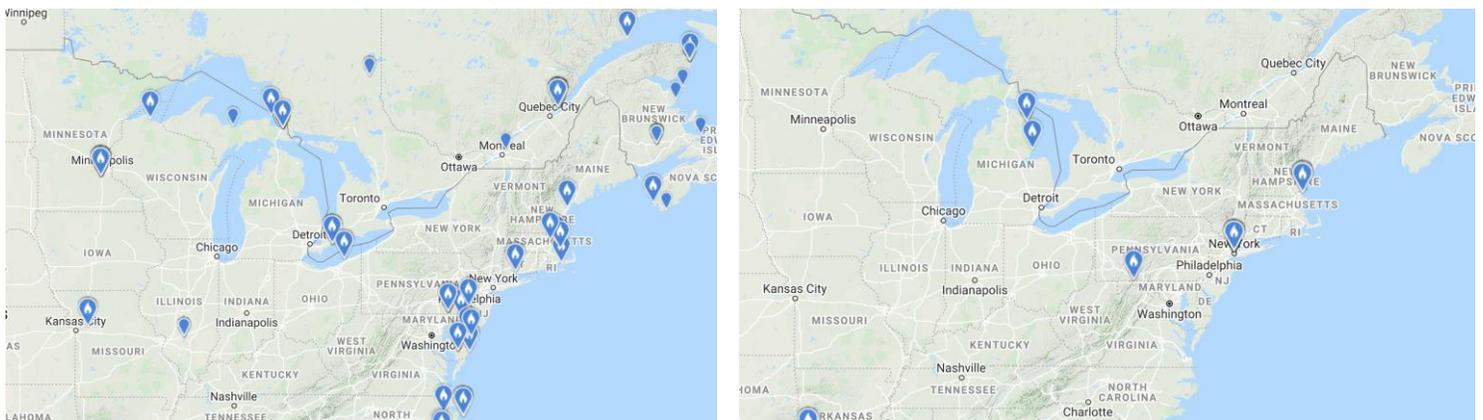
**Figure 4.**

A related field mark which is made more pronounced by difference in bill shape is head shape. As noted on Kevin Karlson's blog (link in references below), Tropical has a more sloping forehead and flatter head which leads to a "deeper" head profile than the steep forehead and rounded crown of Couch's. This field mark was also seemingly present on the Long Point bird which showed a noticeably blocky head.



**Figure 6. A photo of the Long Point Kingbird showing the blocky and flat-crowned head shape characteristic of Tropical Kingbird.**

Last but not least, history of vagrancy must be taken into account when considering the identification of this kingbird. eBird data shows Tropical Kingbird having a much more established pattern of vagrancy in the Northeastern United States and Eastern Canada (as well as a very well established pattern of vagrancy up the West Coast) than does Couch's which mostly shows records just north of its range in Texas as well along the Gulf Coast with only a small smattering of records in the Northeast and American Southwest. This pattern holds for Ontario itself which has multiple records of Tropical Kingbird over the years (including a 2002 record from Chatham-Kent County, not far from Long Point), but no records to date of Couch's Kingbird. Figure 5 shows eBird records of the two species from the Northeast.



**Figure 5. eBird maps of vagrant records of Tropical (left) and Couch's (right) Kingbirds in the Northeastern US and Eastern Canada**

In conclusion, all field marks lead me to believe the bird in question is a Tropical Kingbird. While others might argue— perhaps correctly— that it is impossible to know the identity of this bird with 100% certainty since it unfortunately never called during the period of observation, the complete lack of any evidence pointing towards Couch's Kingbird leaves little doubt in my mind as to it being a Tropical.

Hi Stu -

Sorry to be a bit in responding. Yes it seems it's a TRKI. The tip of p10 appears to fall short of that of p5, and the bill and head shape seem large and squared.

I can see an eccentric pattern in the flight shots, p1-p4 juv, p5-p10 formative; maybe a limit at s2/s3 as well but this is harder to be certain of. The extent of wear to the retained juvenile feathers and the rest of the plumage seems consistent with a one-year-old SY so I'd guess a product of a northern-breeding population.

Given the outer primaries are formative their shape might suggest a male (especially on that of the left wing of the first shot you sent) but I'm not sure of this. At least some male TRKIs have much larger bills than this, which might instead indicate it a female.

Hope this helps!

Peter

**Figure 6. Notes from Peter Pyle to Stu Mackenzie on the ID of the Long Point kingbird**

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**Did you refer to any guides/other literature:**

Sibley Guide to Birds (Sibley); Identification Guide to North American Birds Part I (Pyle); Comparison of Western, Tropical, and Couch's Kingbird Characters (Cornell, <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/crows/kingbirdsX.htm>); Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds (Karlson, <https://www.kevintkarlson.com/kingbirds>)

**(a) at the time:** no

**(b) afterwards:** yes

**Finally, is this record 100% certain?** Yes

**Signed:**



**E-mail Address:** aidanjplace@gmail.com

**Date:** January 30th, 2020