Photo by Jenn Guess

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A Willow Flycatcher

Join us while we Sing for Songbirds throughout the month of October!

California has incredible wildlife diversity. This is due to many factors including the variety in climate, topography, and habitats within the state. There are approximately 100 reptile, 75 amphibian, 650 avian, and 220 mammal species that reside within California. Here at CWC, we treat over 170 unique animal species each year. With the multitude of native wildlife species, it is no surprise that we will occasionally see a new species come through our doors, especially during the fall and winter migration seasons. This was the case with a Willow Flycatcher who was recently admitted.

Willow Flycatchers are small slender birds, weighing about 12 grams (similar to a AAA battery). They are relatively drab in color, with light brown feathers and a slight yellow tint to the abdomen. As the name would imply, these flycatchers reside in willows and shrubs. Their diet primarily consists of insects that they catch in the air or pick off of leaves while they hover. They prefer areas near freshwater, where their food supply is abundant. In the fall months the flycatchers will occasionally eat small berries to supplement their insect diet.

Willow Flycatchers are long distance migrators. They spend the warmer months as far north as Canada, and then migrate to Southern Mexico, Central America, and the northern aspects of South America in the fall. These small birds tend to migrate at night when the winds are calmer. Since this species stays close to water, they are particularly vulnerable to human activities that alters or deteriorates natural waterways. These types of activities include river dewatering, channelization, overgrazing, dam construction, and urbanization.

Although the Willow Flycatcher conservation status is listed as that of Least Concern, studies have shown that their numbers have decreased by 25% since the 1960's. The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (a subspecies) is currently listed as Endangered by the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service, who estimates that fewer than 3,000 are in existence. In fact, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has reported that there has been a 69% decrease in wild animal populations worldwide since 1970. This includes amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds, and mammals. Willow Flycatchers are facing a hard time with climate change, habitat destruction, and man-made obstacles during their long migration. Luckily, for one Willow Flycatcher, a member of the public noticed that they were injured and immediately brought the animal to CWC for care.

California Wildlife Center
Patient of the Week
October 21, 2022

Upon examination, the ICU technician assessed that the flycatcher had a mild right wing droop and a small abrasion on the leg. The flycatcher was also lethargic and not very reactive to stimuli. Luckily the patient did not have any broken bones, and hospital staff wrapped wing to keep it in a natural position. The leg wound was attended to, and the animal received pain medication, anti-inflammatories, and antibiotics. Although we do not know the exact cause of the injuries, we suspect that the patient hit a window during their migration south for the winter.

The wound on the leg healed quickly, and the patient gradually became more alert and active. Technicians carefully monitored the progress of the right wing droop. After three weeks of cage rest, the flycatcher was ready to be moved into an outdoor aviary. Their flight is currently being assessed by hospital staff every few days, and we are hopeful that this long migrator will once again be able to continue their journey south for the winter.

You can help migrating birds this season by installing bird tape on windows and turning off lights at night to prevent them from becoming disoriented. If you find an injured bird, place them in a box with airholes and contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center as soon as possible for advice.