



Doris Evans

# Ash-throated Flycatcher

(*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

Ash-throated Flycatcher is one of the species Tucson Audubon hopes to support with its nest box program. This flycatcher is a common species in warm months in rural and wild areas of the Southwest and northern Mexico. It is migratory and spends winters mostly in the Pacific coastal plain of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and

Honduras. Some also winter on the northeast Atlantic slope of Mexico. A few over-winter in southern Arizona.

Ash-throated Flycatchers are difficult to distinguish from other members of the genus *Myiarchus*, including our local Brown-crested Flycatchers and the Dusky-capped Flycatcher of mountain canyons, with which the Ash-throated Flycatcher overlaps. However, compared to Brown-crested Flycatcher they have proportionately smaller bills and more blending of the ash-gray and dull yellow colors on the breast and belly. It is a little bigger than the Dusky-capped Flycatcher, which lacks the orange-brown tail of the other two. They also can be separated by their calls.

Ash-throated Flycatcher is rarely seen in urban and suburban areas of central and southern Arizona the, except where there are edges of natural open space. One study at the University of Arizona found that in the greater Tucson area Ash-throated Flycatcher was associated with large natural areas and washes, rather than with particular characteristics of neighborhoods. This may result from lack of foraging habitat in suburban areas but it also may simply result from a lack of suitable nesting cavities.

Tucson Audubon's nest box program seeks to support populations of Ash-throated Flycatchers on the urban fringe and create new nesting opportunities in the rest of suburbia. They are highly opportunistic nesters and adapt easily to human activity. With this flexibility, Ash-throated Flycatchers provide ample opportunities for people to learn about the needs and habits of nesting birds. Their noisy whistles and acrobatic insect catching make them an enjoyable species to study as they go about their nesting rituals.

**HABITAT** Ash-throated Flycatchers nest in both sparse desert scrub and riparian corridors but are less tied to tree canopy than their cousins the Brown-crested flycatcher and the Great-crested Flycatcher. When nesting in riparian woodlands they are more likely to forage out into desert scrub. That makes them easier to find and see in open desert areas. They build nests in woodpecker holes and natural cavities of saguaros, mesquite, and palo verdes.

## ***Nest Box Specs***

<b>HOLE</b>	2" diameter
<b>DEPTH</b>	9"
<b>FLOOR</b>	6" x 6"
<b>OTHER</b>	side-opening for easy monitoring

**FOOD PREFERENCES** During breeding season the main food sources is arthropods (insects, spiders and others). These are usually caught in low foliage, on the ground or on short flights between perches rather than on the wing in open areas. Sometimes they also eat fruit, and rarely small reptiles and mammals.

**NESTING FACTS** After migrating to Mexico for the winter, Ash-throated Flycatchers return to their breeding grounds in Arizona in late February and early March. Because Ash-throated Flycatchers arrive on the breeding grounds after some birds are already choosing holes in which to nest, they are often forced to choose nest-cavities with larger entrance holes. This leaves their nests more vulnerable to predators.

They lay eggs from late March to mid-May with peak activity in April. They can reproduce quickly, with time from pair formation to fledging of young ranging from 30 to 42 days! After laying begins, there is typically one egg laid per day. Most nests have 4 or 5 eggs but as many as 7 have been reported. Eggs are cream to ivory colored with thin or thick streaks usually brown or reddish-brown.

Researchers are uncertain as to whether Ash-throated Flycatchers in southern Arizona commonly raise more than one brood. If you have a successful nest box with Ash-throated Flycatchers, please inform us if they nest a second time.



*Ash-throated Flycatcher egg and chicks.  
Credit: Harriet Meador*

**BOXES AND BOX MOUNTING** Ash-throated Flycatchers readily use wooden nest boxes. They use the size of box that Tucson Audubon promotes for them but also are known to use somewhat smaller bluebird boxes. Boxes larger than those we promote may not exclude European Starling. Our box will not exclude House Sparrows so when you put up this box you should be vigilant and evict them as well as starlings.

Boxes should be placed between 4.5 and 20 feet high, with 8 feet being ideal. Boxes mounted in mesquite trees or in the vicinity of other shade sources should help to keep nest temperatures from rising too high.

Experiments using boxes to increase nesting density by Ash-throated Flycatchers have been successful in other areas, though it is not unusual for several of the boxes to go unused. If your box gets infested with House Sparrows and goes unused, experiment with moving it to a different location to see if this helps. However, beware that it may not be used in its new location until the following spring.



