

# Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Recovery



The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher depends upon desert riparian ecosystems – the rarest habitat in North America. These small birds have found a place to survive along the Virgin River in St. George, Utah.



## Long Journey, Short Stay

Flycatchers migrate from Central America and arrive on breeding grounds along the Virgin River riparian corridor in early May. After pairing, females will lay two to four eggs which are incubated for 11-14 days. Upon hatching, adults will feed their young a variety of insects for 10-15 days in the nest and for an additional 1-2 weeks after leaving the nest. By mid-August, the birds will depart their nesting sites and begin the journey back to their wintering grounds.



The **Virgin River** is a linear oasis that flows from its headwaters in southwestern **Utah** through Arizona and Nevada until it empties into Lake Mead. This river provides essential resources for both people and animals as it flows through an otherwise arid red-rock landscape located near the convergence of the Mojave Desert and Colorado Plateau. In the **St. George** area, the river meanders through a wide floodplain and supports associated **wetlands** and **riparian woodlands**. These habitat patches found along the Virgin River are utilized by **breeding flycatchers**.

The **Southwestern Willow Flycatcher** was federally listed as endangered in 1995 due to population declines resulting from loss, degradation, and fragmentation of riparian habitats. Additional threats to flycatcher survival include nest parasitism by the **Brown-headed Cowbird** and habitat degradation by the **Tamarisk Leaf Beetle**.

The **Virgin River Program** began implementing conservation actions in 2005 to protect flycatcher populations along the Virgin River including floodplain protection, non-native vegetation removal, and riparian restoration. Beginning in 2008, the Program funded **Utah Division of Wildlife Resources** to monitor flycatcher breeding activity, reproductive success, and habitat use. Through **cooperative efforts** with local partners and agencies, several obstacles have been overcome and conflicts avoided.



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### CONFLICTS AVOIDED

*Human development vs. an endangered species? No problem.*

Virgin River Program partnerships have preserved and enhanced critical nesting habitat for the flycatcher without restricting human population growth and urban development. These cooperative efforts have streamlined regulatory process for communities, water users, and landowners while also providing flexibility in infrastructure maintenance and development.

The Program ensures that the Virgin River and associated riparian habitat continue to provide an oasis for both humans and wildlife within a busy, thriving urban community.



### Number of Southwestern Willow Flycatchers breeding along the Virgin River in St. George, Utah



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One speckled Brown-headed Cowbird egg in a Southwestern Willow Flycatcher nest

### BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD MANAGEMENT

Brown-headed cowbirds are **brood parasites** that lay eggs in other species' nests. Cowbird nestlings will outcompete flycatcher young, which often causes **nest failure**. Since 2013, hundreds of cowbirds have been **trapped and removed** from flycatcher breeding sites, resulting in a significant increase in nest survival of flycatchers and many other riparian bird species.



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Brown-headed Cowbird female (right) & male (left) are brood parasites that provide no parental care

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