

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Romanced by a Phoebe

A sure sign of spring is when the eastern phoebe goes a-courtin'

By J. Morton Galetto



Each spring he serenades me in gray tails, a creamy shirt, and a gray cap. His brown eyes

are hopeful. He uses our courtyard as his amphitheater, where his voice broadcasts across the front of our property. He moves to the back of the house, sits on a balcony railing, and sings again. He will not be ignored. Every spring he comes to draw me, to captivate me. This year he showed up the second week in March.

Interestingly, I am not alone. Many people all over the northeastern half of the United States and into northwestern Canada are being approached by a similar suitor, a species if you prefer, a bird, the eastern phoebe (scientific name *Sayornis phoebe*), especially if they live near water, stream, or riverside with a wooded edge. Another requisite is an overhang: a porch or a bridge. Here they nest on ledges and corners.

Eastern phoebes are one of the birds that has evolved to adapt to man's mark on the landscape, making use of human-built structures. But they will also use naturally-occurring rocky outcrops near riverbanks and cave entrances.

Admittedly he is not really calling to me even though he never fails to get my attention. His repertoire involves two main variations of "fee-bee" and "fee-b-be-bee." Ornithologists call this Regularly Repeated Vocalizations and in the eastern phoebe's they are termed

case RR1 and RR2. These he belts out with mixed variations. Occasionally he raises his head feathers, transforming his smooth head into a crest. It appears to me that this raised crest is a response to a concern. When they are seemingly relaxed it is possible they are simply showing off. However this heightened alertness adds to their visual appeal and formidable character. Although eastern phoebes are only 5 1/2" – 6 3/4" with a 10-11" wingspan they have a stately presence.



The eastern phoebe's scientific name, Sayornis phoebe, is a construct of Charles Lucien Bonaparte's name for Say's phoebe -Muscicapa saya, while ornis is ancient Greek for "bird." Charles was a nephew of Napoleon who coined the term Say's Phoebe after American naturalist Thomas Say. Phoebe is likely chosen because it mimics the sound of the bird's call, although Phoebe is also another name for the Roman goddess Diana. Note the raised feathers producing a crest. Photo: Steve Gifford.

He is actually calling for a mate. She too can sing but she does so only rarely and briefly. Both sexes will call a "clear, sweet, weak 'chip'" (Farrand 1983). The male will sing until he is paired with a female, and after that they will be monogamous throughout the breeding season. Exceptions are rare, and in fact the same pair may breed at a site in consecutive years.

After they pair they will proceed to select a nesting site. In our case they have chosen to build under the raised deck on the river side of our home. Between our house and the river is a buffer of woods which provides all the main habitat requisites the species seeks. For food they will eat fruits and berries in colder months but they are primarily insectivorous during their breeding season. A member of the flycatcher family, the eastern phoebe relies chiefly on insects: ants, flies, ticks, bees, dragonflies, moths. and the like.

In addition to claiming the railing and the courtyard, our suitor flies from tree to tree shouting his "fee-bee" and "fee-b-be-bee" in what I presume to be a territorial declaration, "This is my area, so listen up!" Their repertoire of communication includes mandible snapping; this is not a bite but a sound and it is said to have startled many a

“ringer” (what the English call a person who bands birds).

When selecting a nesting site the male will advertise a vacancy by chattering and fluttering near the new area. If this is a returning couple possibly this is merely perfunctory, or maybe it is simply part of a compulsory ritual. These birds are commonly known to live three - four years, but popular lore calls out a 10-year-old, banded in Iowa in 1979 and found in Alberta, Canada in 1989.

We have had a nest under our deck most of the 40+ years that we have lived along the Maurice River. Selecting a location isn't a heavy lift since eastern phoebes will often make use of the same site in successive years. At times they may also borrow a robin or barn swallow nest.

Each spring through summer phoebes will raise two broods, if successful. One year we witnessed a black snake predate on the eggs and I suspect that was not the only time this has happened. Other known predators include raccoons, chipmunks, mice, crows, jays, and house wrens. Their greatest threat is thought to be the cowbird who lays an egg in a different species' nest for surrogate parenting. Rearing this chick is commonly at the expense of the true owner's young.

Eggs are laid and incubated for 16 days, and after hatching the chicks will fledge in the same amount of time. A clutch is typically five eggs. One to two weeks after the chicks have left the nest the female will lay a second clutch and the process will begin over again.

It is estimated that over 16 days' time adults make 600 to 1,000 trips with food. As the chicks grow the nest will be bursting at the seams, so that the chicks must hang on the side to exercise their wings in preparation for flight.

A number of birds like to use a perch before entering their nesting location – a place from which they can check whether things are “all clear.” This surveillance is also an effort not to give away their nesting location to a possible predator. At our home the birds use the railing of our elevated deck to scan the area before making a food delivery.

Many birds hop or make short flights from limb to limb. Phoebes tend to move primarily by direct flight. To enter the nest they typically make a low swoop near the ground with an upward arc into the nest.



The eastern phoebe is a passerine - a perching bird with four toes: three forward facing and one backward. This configuration allows the bird to grip branches. Photos: Steve Gifford.

Outside of breeding season phoebes are primarily loners, having little contact with their own species. Many birds learn their song from conspecifics (others of their species), yet laboratory experiments show that eastern phoebes know theirs innately.

I hope that each year my imagined courtship by an eastern phoebe continues, since it has become a rite of spring as much as the appearance of the first daffodil.

Sources

CornellLab Birds of the World website.

AnimalDiversity.org

iNaturalist