



Species Eastern Phoebe

Potlight *Sayornis phoebe*

There he sits, singing and bobbing his tail all the while, sporting drab, brownish-gray and white plumage. They may not be the most visually stunning bird you'll see in your yard this spring, but the arrival of the first male Eastern Phoebe is a soul-satisfying, calendar-turning event after a long northeastern winter. The raspy, oft repeated call of "fee-bee" (I love it when a bird says it's own name) is usually heard before you lay eyes on this happy harbinger of spring. Uncannily, they return on almost the exact same day each year. For New England, that is either several days before or a week or two after the spring equinox - south to north.

Subocine Songs Say so Much.

Phoebes aren't known for their spectacular songs or singing capabilities ("[Smelly Cat](#)" being the obvious exception), but what they lack in musicality they more than make up for in enthusiasm. Its companionable song can be heard in your yard throughout summer and well into the autumn, with both sexes participating though males are the most vociferous - especially in breeding season. Phoebes are part of the bird suborder "suboscine", which is, naturally, distinguished from an "oscine", or songbird. The suboscines are considered to be more primitive in anatomy and behavior than the highly specialized oscines. All that to say it should be no surprise to you or me that the Phoebe "fee-bee" song is simple, short, and ras-pee, agree? The most creative it can get is to have the song either rise or, more often, fall in pitch at the end. This less complex song than many other songbirds is due to the Phoebe having a relatively simple voice box with fewer muscles and fine control than the more melodious migrants such as

Cardinals, Sparrows, and the, let's face it, show-off Warblers.

"Primitive" or no, a feather in the cap of Phoebes that most other songbirds lack is that they do not need to learn their song before belting it out. Most songbird chicks must hear and then imitate their parents songs, but a Phoebe's genes have already pre-programmed its brain fresh from the egg.

A Phoebe with a mouthful of nesting material.



A Real Tail-wagging-the-Bird Situation.

So why *do* Phoebes bob (or "wag" or "pump", depending on who you ask) their tails so much? I'm glad you asked. No one knows. But now that the proverbial can is open and worms abound, let's explore some of the more interesting theories:

Cryptic camouflage - Phoebes prefer to nest near fresh running water when possible. This theory goes that, as with other like-minded birds, they ungulate their tails to better break up their outline and blend in with their surroundings such as swaying branches, leaves, and a babbling brook. This is common in other birds that habituate near water such as Dippers, Waterthrush, and - wait for it - Wagtails.

Predator deterrent - This theory is gaining momentum in recent years. A study of Black Phoebe's in California in 2011 found that when a potential predator's call - a Cooper's Hawk in this case - was broadcast, the tail-pumping rate tripled in Phoebes within earshot. This is the bird's way of, perhaps even subconsciously, visually signalling to a nearby predator that: "I know you're there, so don't bother trying to catch me."

A true tail of sacrifice - Some insist that the tail motion is either designed to distract/attract a pursuing predator. The idea being that if the Phoebe is caught, the hawk will only come away with a talon-ful of tail feathers. The Phoebe will then have to wait until it's next molt to grow them back. Evidence used to support this theory is that other animals also sacrifice their tails - including salamanders, squirrels, and lizards. And as anyone who saw Jurassic Park knows, birds descend from reptiles so....

Bird forums abound with heated back-and-forths about why one theory is superior to another. The truth may, as with so much in life, lie on a spectrum somewhere among all of them, with no single one being the tail-all.

Nesting Instinct.

Ideally, Phoebes prefer to nest near water since it means plenty of flying insects for its hungry chicks. Males return first from wintering grounds as far south as Mexico and north as New Jersey. They are primarily looking for some kind of overhanging structure to provide protection from the elements. When Europeans began erecting permanent buildings and bridges Phoebes happily adapted to utilizing these human structures and are still commonly associated with eaves, porches, and barns today. Males stake and defend prime territory until females arrive a week or two later. If Phoebes nested in your yard in the previous summer, their sturdy, cup-like nest of mud, grass, and moss will usually survive the winter. Like snowbirds of the two-



Left to right: Eastern Phoebes share the dull plumage similar to other flycatchers. Their sturdy nests are a combination of mud, dry grass, and moss, and can get crowded as their 3 to 5 chicks grow. Few insects are quick enough to escape their claspings bills.

legged variety, the same pair of Phoebes is likely to return the same nest each spring. They'll do a little refurbishing if necessary, packing it with more mud-soaked grass and moss. Most years, the birds can hatch and fledge two broods of young each breeding season.

Sac Semper Tyrannis.

Eastern Phoebe's belong to the boisterous and bossy bird family known as Tyrant Flycatchers. Like most, they are simply colored, with shades of olive-green, gray, and brown on top and lighter colors below. As the name might suggest, tyrant flycatchers are very territorial while breeding and actively defend nesting grounds from birds of the same or competing species. The most aggressive tyrant flycatchers are the Kingbirds, which will fearlessly attack much larger birds. Phoebes are less aggressive than their Kingbird cousins, and can even become quite habituated to human presence near their nest and chicks. They are attentive parents in all ways, including diligently removing the many fecal sacs produced by their chirping chicks. An under appreciated natural wonder for sure, fecal sacs are self-contained bags of baby-bird poop.

The parents scoop them up and drop them some distance from the nest. This not only keeps the nest tidy and discourages bacterial growth, but may also make it harder for predators to find the nest if they are guided by scent.

Flycatching Phenom

Phoebes are sit-and-wait hunters. From a good vantage point, they visually sight their prey then launch to pursue and capture it. Like all flycatchers, they are swift on the wing - deftly snatching insects in mid-air with acrobatic aplomb. Many times they re-align on the same perch they departed from not a few seconds previous in an near effortless hand-wiping show of bug-bagging bravado. Especially prolific during chick feeding time, one adult can catch an average of 1.21 insects per minute, hitting speeds of over 70 prey-per-hour. Favorite prey items include beetles, sawflies, wasps, bees, moths, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and crickets.

"Several days in succession I went to the spot, and saw with pleasure that as my visits increased in frequency, the birds became more familiarized to me, and, before a week had elapsed, the [Phoebes] and myself were quite on terms of intimacy."
- John James Audubon. 1840

One to Beat the Band

Another claim to fame Phoebes hold revolves around none other than American birding legend John James Audubon. In 1804 at the tender age of 18, he performed perhaps the first banding study on nesting Phoebes in "a small cave scooped out of the solid rock by the hand of nature" in Pennsylvania. The curious kid wondered whether the birds practiced 'natal philopatry' (i.e. - returned to their place of birth to breed). To test this, he attached 'light threads' on the legs of 5 nestlings "when they were about to leave the nest." In later recountings of the story, Audubon claims to have found two tagged Phoebes nesting near their birthplace the next spring.

Many scholars are dubious towards this delightful story and think it's more likely part of a carefully crafted viral marketing campaign orchestrated by Audubon himself. He really was an American ahead of his time.

First, the odds of 2 out of 5 banded birds returning are near zero since similar modern and much larger studies have had about a 1.3% to 1.8% rate of return (218 out of 11,847 in one example): much lower than the 40% Audubon enjoyed. It

doesn't make his story impossible, yet highly improbable. Add to that, it was no secret at the time that Audubon was near desperate to establish his bona fides as a gifted ornithologist. If for no other reason than to create buzz around his recently for-sale collection of etchings based on his wonderful paintings of North American birds. He was often at odds with contemporary ornithologists. One in particular, Elliott Coues, went as far to say Audubon "liked to exaggerate and 'embroider,' and make his page glow like a hummingbird's throat" and had "no genius for accuracy, no taste for dull, dry detail." Ouch.

For more information.

- [Listen](#) to the calls of an Eastern Phoebe on Cornell Labs All About Birds website.

- [Learn](#) how to build and put up a nesting structure to attract a breeding pair of Phoebes.