

Eastern Phoebe

Picoides pubescens

The Eastern Phoebe is a loner, rarely coming in contact with other phoebes. Even members of a mated pair do not spend much time together. They may roost together a bit early in pair formation, but even during egg laying the female frequently chases the male away from her.

In winter, phoebes may join flocks of Pine and Palm warblers and other species in loose flocks that forage in open fields and wood edges. But only rarely will more than one phoebe be in a flock.

Appropriately named, the Eastern Phoebe will sing its familiar “fee-bee” song, repeating the call many times; the second syllable is alternately higher or lower than the first. It also has a distinctive, short chip.

One of the most distinctive behavior is the ‘tail-wag,’ where the phoebe sweeps its tail widely up and down and then side to side.

The Eastern Phoebe is medium-sized flycatcher, dull in coloration to blend in with its surrounding woodland habitat. The upperparts of the adults are olive or grayish-brown, and the underparts tend to be pale buff. Juveniles have white bars on their wings.

Phoebes have a wide, flat black bills with hairy bristles at the bases of their bills to help them funnel the flying insects into their mouths. Most insects are caught as the birds fly out to snatch them in mid-flight, but they occasionally pick insects off vegetation.

The *fee-bee* song is innate. Even birds that have been hand-raised and not allowed to hear other phoebes still sing a perfect song. For most other songbirds, however, being raised in isolation results in poor imitations of the true song—those young birds need to hear other males of their species sing in order to fine tune their vocalizations. Not so for the phoebe.

Females sing rarely and then only briefly. Males use the vocalizations to



announce territory, but more often to attract a mate. Territorial disputes, involving vocalizations and chases but rarely physical contact, frequently break out in the breeding season. The Eastern Phoebe is highly territorial.

The Eastern Phoebe is predominantly insectivorous, consuming mostly flying insects such as wasps, ants, flies and wild bees. Invertebrates such as grasshoppers, airborne spiders, and even small fishes from shallow water round out their diet.

Flycatching is its main means of obtaining food, usually done from a perch less than 15 yards off the ground. It also occasionally chases flying insects to the ground, pounces on insects on the ground, and picks insects from trees while hovering. Its most active foraging period occurs in the morning.

Eastern Phoebes are quite hardy for birds that feed extensively on flying insects, and they are regularly found throughout the southern United States and Mexico in winter.

To survive cold spells in winter, they supplement their diet with fruits such as sumac, poison ivy, wax myrtle, and holly. Over 20% of their winter diet can be comprised of fruit, compared to less than 5% in spring and summer.

The breeding range of the Eastern Phoebe extends from northern Canada down into the southeastern U.S. It winters primarily in the southeastern U.S., with especially heavy concentrations in Texas and Florida.

Its migrations follow the insect emergence northward in spring and frost-induced insect decline southward in fall. Consequently, Eastern Phoebes are one of the first migratory birds to arrive on breeding grounds in the northeastern United States and one of the last to leave in the fall. Their early arrival and late departure allow them to nest twice a season while many other migratory birds only have time to nest once.

Another difference from many songbirds is that Eastern Phoebes are quite loyal to their nesting sites and will reuse them year after year, often building one nest right on top of the previous year’s nest.

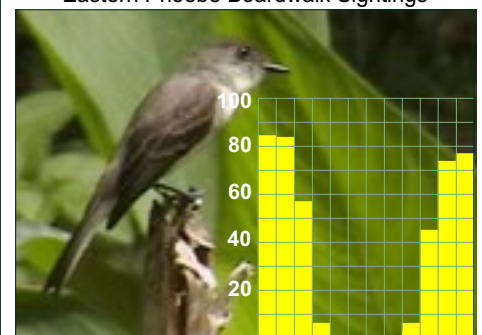
At one location in New England, successive generations of phoebes returned to breed under the same bridge for over 30 years. In contrast, other songbirds usually build completely new nests every year.

By adapting nesting locales to human development, Eastern Phoebe numbers have increased steadily over the last 40 years except for years following harsh winters.

Fast Phoebe Fact

- In 1804, the Eastern Phoebe became the first banded bird in North America. John James Audubon attached silvered thread to the legs of an Eastern Phoebe’s brood and tracked returns.

Eastern Phoebe Boardwalk Sightings



(Percentage of days/month seen, 1998-2009)