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HANDSOME: A gray breast and rich cinnamon-colored belly distinguish Say's Phoebe, a flycatcher whose range extends from northern Alaska to central Mexico.



Subtle songster

Often overlooked, the little-studied Say's Phoebe brings the wild close to home in western North America

BY SOPHIE A. H. OSBORN

As

the sun crept over the frosted sagebrush hills, I huffed along on my morning run, pushing against an unrelenting headwind. Traces of snow, the cold bite of a late March wind, and the stark landscape all hinted at winter's reluctance to loosen its grip on the land. And then I heard it. A clear, haunting, whistled *pit-tseew* that stopped me in my tracks and prompted a broad smile. One of my favorite harbingers of spring had just announced itself. The somberly elegant Say's Phoebe had returned from its winter haunts and was sweetly, soulfully announcing the coming of spring in sagebrush country.

Hoping for my first glimpse of the new arrival for the year, I scanned the tops of sagebrush bushes, fence posts, and the roof lines of nearby houses, searching for the graceful songster. Without binoculars, I knew that spotting the relatively nondescript gray-brown bird would be challenging. But after listening to the phoebe's persistently repeated call and trying to isolate the mournful sound, I finally saw the bird when it sallied out from the top of a sage bush, dropped to the ground to retrieve an invisible, chilled insect, then returned to its perch.

Regrettably, the phoebe was too far away for me to see its gray breast and richly colored cinnamon belly, but its

YOUNGSTERS: A trio of Say's Phoebe fledglings sits on a ledge. The breeding season runs from May through July.



The phoebe's frequent habit of plucking prey off the ground may help it survive cold, snowy spells.

distinctive black tail was visible, and its dark beak showed no flash of color. The bird's understated beauty brought to mind a female Northern Cardinal, though its upright posture, slender beak, and smaller body size — between that of a tanager and a chickadee — were more akin to its flycatcher relatives than to the seed-eating cardinal.

A denizen of open country that resides only in western North America, the Say's Phoebe inhabits sagebrush plains, badlands, barren foothills, rimrock, canyons, and desert edges from the Great Plains west almost to the Pacific Coast. Ranging from central Mexico to Alaska and northern Canada's arctic tundra, the species has one of the broadest latitudinal ranges of any flycatcher, occurring farther north than any of its insect-eating North American counterparts. It is the only North American flycatcher to breed north of arctic Alaska's spruce forests. Gaps occur within its range wherever thick forests predominate, since it avoids these types of habitats.

HARDY HUNTER

As I watched my Say's Phoebe sally out

from its perch again and grab another insect from the ground, I marveled at its ability to secure insects, when so few seemed to be active, and to brave the inclement weather that was still sure to batter the windswept, high-elevation Wyoming basin country where I lived. The phoebe's frequent habit of plucking prey off the ground, which allows it to feed on spiders and other invertebrates that are unavailable to exclusively aerial insectivores like swallows and most other flycatchers, may help it survive cold, snowy spells. The Say's Phoebe will also hover, like a Mountain Bluebird or American Kestrel, a few feet above the ground when searching for prey. Its hunting habits allow the bird to migrate north earlier than other western flycatchers that only snatch airborne prey.

While watching the phoebe admirably coping with the not-exactly-welcoming environment to which it had just returned, I tried to envision the bird's warmer winter haunts. In the fall, northern populations of the species migrate south to winter in the southwestern United States, along the Pacific Coast, and in Mexico, overlapping with

resident phoebes in these areas.

In winter, Say's Phoebes may be found in agricultural areas as well as in open, grassy fields with scattered shrubs and trees. I smiled, imagining my phoebe hunting insects in places that were frequented by scavenging Crested Caracaras, crimson Vermilion Flycatchers, boisterous Great Kiskadees, husky-billed Pyrrhuloxias, comical Groove-billed Anis, and other southern resident birds. The phoebe's journeys unwittingly connected me to faraway places and marked subtle seasonal shifts that lent vibrancy to otherwise unremarkable winter-white days.

The species is named after Thomas Say, who collected the first specimen near Cañon City, Colorado, in 1819. He was an American naturalist of international repute, who participated in a number of frontier-area surveys and was known particularly for his studies of shells and insects. (He described well over 1,000 species of beetle, in addition to countless other insects.) As the zoologist on an exploration of the Rocky Mountains in 1819 and 1820, Say was the first to scientifically describe the coyote and swift fox, reptiles such as the

western ribbon snake and the collared lizard, and numerous birds, including the Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Rock Wren, Orange-crowned Warbler, Lark Sparrow, and Lazuli Bunting.

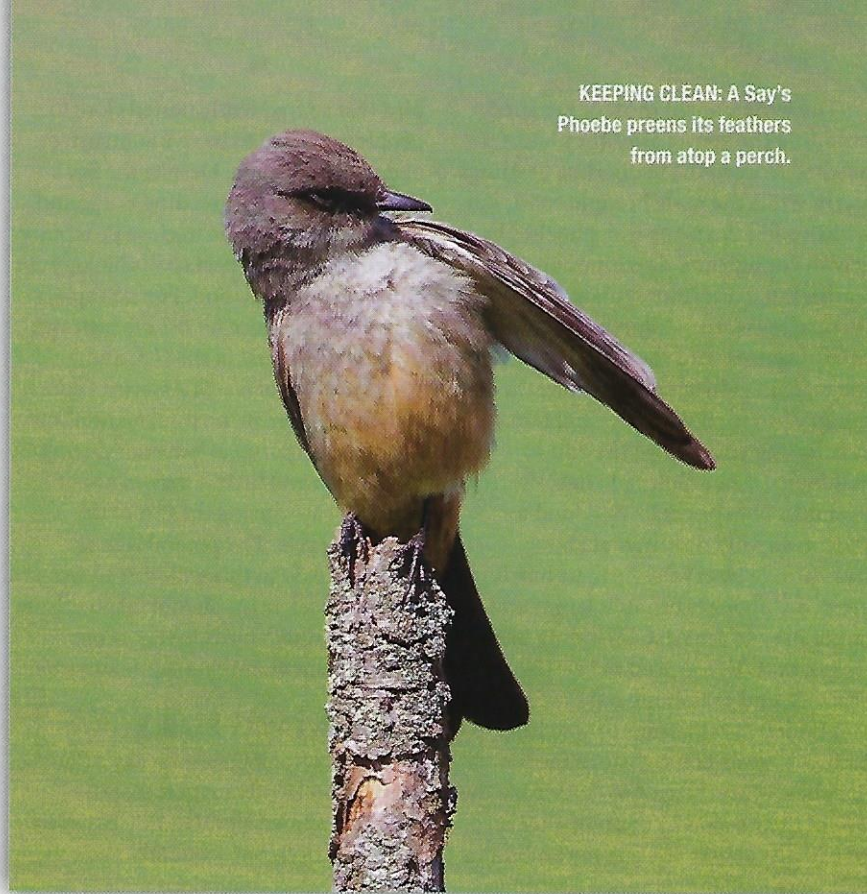
Coaxing my chilled muscles into motion again to complete my run, I wondered whether Say's Phoebes would ever use a ledge I had placed for them under the eaves of my house several years earlier. The species typically nests in holes and crevices, as well as on protected ledges and other horizontal surfaces. Natural nests may be found on cliffs, rimrock, and steep creek banks.

The birds also build their nests in barns, sheds, and machinery — wherever a protective overhang provides them with shelter. Their willingness to use human structures to support their nests has allowed the phoebes to expand into areas where natural nest sites are unavailable. And their confiding behavior brings their nesting activities into close proximity to those who are fortunate enough to host them.

Say's Phoebes also use nests that have been constructed by other species, including Barn Swallows, American Robins, and Black Phoebes. They even will use Cliff Swallow nests — enclosed, globular structures made of mud — if the nests have been broken, so that they form a shelf. Because available nest sites are scarce, Say's Phoebes often will reuse nest sites from year to year and even within a season if they lay a second clutch.

In New Mexico, a pair initially used an old Barn Swallow nest to raise its first brood. Swallows subsequently claimed the nest once the phoebe nestlings had fledged. But after the swallows had laid an egg, the phoebes returned and tried to commandeer the nest to lay a second clutch. They were only partially successful in claiming the site, and soon the nest included a mixed clutch of phoebe and swallow eggs. The females of both species began incubating, though the female swallow had to sneak onto the nest in the presence of the larger and more aggressive phoebe. Once the three phoebe and two swallow eggs hatched, however, the swallows became increasingly aggressive, mobbing the phoebes whenever they came to the nest to feed their young.

Nevertheless, the phoebes persisted, and adults of both species delivered



KEEPING CLEAN: A Say's Phoebe preens its feathers from atop a perch.

insect prey indiscriminately to swallow and phoebe nestlings. Eventually, two nestling swallows and two nestling phoebes successfully left the nest. This unusual case of interspecific nesting (two species nesting together) likely occurred because suitable nest sites were scarce, and both species found the juncture of two steel girders that supported a roof to be an ideal — if not entirely available — site.

A NEST IN MY YARD

Despite its availability, the ledge under my eaves had never been used by phoebes or swallows. But, over the ensuing weeks after my run, a male phoebe became a regular visitor to my yard, broadcasting his sweet, clear call from my rooftop and a nearby mountain ash sapling. He disappeared during several big snowstorms that buffeted the area in April, and I wondered how he could possibly survive the harsh conditions. But invariably, whenever the weather broke, I was treated again to the sweet morning *pit-tseew* calls interspersed with a burrier *pureet*. And, to my delight, just over a month after I heard the first Say's Phoebe of the season calling on my run, the male's

look-alike mate, which had returned from her winter home sometime after he did, started to bring grasses and weed stems to the ledge to build a nest. Say's Phoebe nests can include pebbles (for the base), dry grasses, weeds, bits of wood, moss, plant fibers, dry sage blooms, spider webs, and cocoons, and they are often lined with wool, hair, fibers, and occasionally feathers.

As I emerged from the side door of my garage one early May morning, I was as surprised to find a phoebe lying in her nest as the bird was to see me. Fortunately, she didn't flush, and I quickly backed away, determined to use the main garage vehicle door from now on to minimize any disturbance I might cause her. After the birds incubated their eggs for about two weeks, I began to see the male bringing tiny food items — perhaps flies or ants — to the nest. To my delight, I could watch him from my home-office window hunting from the mountain ash sapling, a favorite perch. He frequently snatched airborne prey, though he also dropped to the ground, on occasion, to pick up food items, then either returned to his perch or flew up to the ledge, which was just out of my view, to feed his nestlings.

The female spent most of her time brooding the young after they had hatched to keep the featherless nestlings warm while the male brought food. But within a few days, the tiny phoebes had grown enough and developed enough feathering to thermoregulate — or keep themselves warm — during the female's brief absences, and she began to help the male in gathering insects for the hungry brood. Both males and females care for the young, and they do so assiduously. At a Colorado nest site, for example, phoebes delivered food to their 4-day-old nestlings at about five-minute intervals. As their nestlings grew, my phoebes brought larger and larger prey to the nest, including bees, wasps, and flies, as well as beetles, crickets, and grasshoppers.

Hidden in my garage or watching from afar so as not to disturb the parent phoebes, I eagerly tried to determine the size of their brood by counting beaks. I was finally able to see that my ambitious pair were raising five young nestlings, which, after two weeks, threatened to spill over the small ledge that supported their rather untidy nest. Say's Phoebe's typically lay clutches of four or five eggs. The young looked similar to their parents but had two buff-colored bars on each wing and yellow gapes that gave them a wide-mouthed look. Say's Phoebe nestlings usually leave the nest when they are 17 to 21 days old.

It seemed closer to three weeks before my youngsters finally took their hesitant first flights, though I couldn't be sure of their age since I didn't know exactly when they had hatched. Over the next few days, I delighted in spotting the vociferous yellow-gaped youngsters in my yard. They particularly liked to perch on a large privacy fence and in a small cluster of aspens. Soon, though, they were making flights over to my neighbor's horse shelter and then, regrettably, I stopped seeing them as they traveled farther afield. As summer days waned, I thought often about their fates and wondered whether they had survived to embark on their long migration flights.

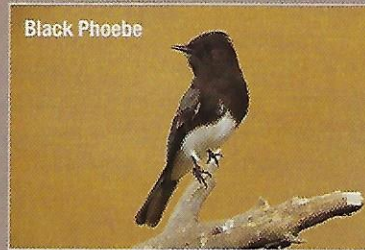
My phoebes, or perhaps another pair that similarly keyed into an available nest site, returned to the ledge the following year, and I was treated to another spring of phoebe watching before I moved to Montana. Throughout, I marveled that a

bird that so frequently nested close to people managed to be so unobtrusive and so little known. Despite the Say's Phoebe's extensive breeding range and its willingness to nest in close proximity to people, many aspects of its biology are still poorly understood. For example, a definitive reference on the life histories of birds that breed in the U.S. and Canada, *Birds of North America Online*, states that there is "no information" on the phoebe's parental behavior during incubation and little is known about parental care during the rest of the breeding cycle. The general lack of attention paid to this widespread western species by scientists should inspire those of us who watch birds to report our observations about this subtle songster.

NUMBERS FAIRLY STABLE

Existing biological data on Say's Phoebe population trends suggest that the species declined significantly between 1966 and 1991. Subsequently, though, many phoebe populations appear to have stabilized and even increased, and the bird's status is not currently of significant concern to conservationists. Nevertheless, phoebes are subject to many types of mortality, some of which are preventable from a human standpoint. For example, adult phoebes and their young are killed by domestic and feral cats, as well as other predators.

In addition to succumbing to inclement weather and being displaced by habitat destruction, the birds may perish as a result of collisions with wind turbines, vehicles, windows, and other human structures. Surprisingly, given how much I relished my phoebes' proximity and breeding activities, the birds are not always welcomed in our developed landscapes. In a Texas study, almost half of the eggs that were lost prior to hatching were destroyed by people. After leaving Wyoming, I found my thoughts often returned to Say's Phoebes each spring, and I hoped that the new owners of my house enjoyed the return of the elegant, unobtrusive birds. If they welcomed the phoebes as I did, not only would they share their home with a beneficial and benign insectivore, but they also might discover an often-overlooked bird that subtly and sweetly connects us to the vanishingly wild world beyond our front doors. 🐦



Close relatives

The Say's Phoebe shares its *Sayornis* genus with two slightly smaller phoebes: the much-loved, drably dressed Eastern Phoebe, which inhabits deciduous forests in eastern and central North America and often builds its nest over doorways, and the aptly named, diminutively dapper Black Phoebe, which is typically found close to waterways in the Southwest and along the Pacific Coast. The Black Phoebe's range extends southward through Central America and western South America to as far as northwestern Argentina.

Part of the large bird family known as the tyrant flycatchers, which occur only in North and South America and number over 400 species, the insect-eating phoebes build open-cup nests — often on human structures — and are frequently seen raising and lowering their tails while perched. Like other flycatchers, phoebes lack the sophisticated vocal abilities of other songbirds, and their repetitive songs consist of two to three simple notes.

Sophie A. H. Osborn is a wildlife biologist and a natural history writer. She has worked on the conservation of more than a dozen bird species in the United States, Central America, and South America. She has written for Birder's Guide, Wyoming Wildlife, and Sojourns magazines, and her first book, Condors in Canyon Country, won the 2007 National Outdoor Book Award in the Nature and Environment category, among other national and regional awards. In past issues of BirdWatching, she has written about birding in Honduras and about her spark bird, the Hooded Merganser.