PHOEBE MAGIC 4

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Julie Zickefoose: Feeders Provide Lessons on Bird Life

From the publishers of Bird Watcher's Digest
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— Julie Zickefoose

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Phoebe Magic
— Julie Zickefoose

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— Bill Thompson, III

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Top: Eastern phoebe.
Above: Northern cardinal, male and female.
Right: Northern harrier, female.
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Watching Backyard Birds (ISSN 1098-0229) is published bimonthly by Pardson Corporation. Material appearing in Watching Backyard Birds may not be reprinted without permission.

Subscriptions

One year: $16 • Two years: $30 • Single issue: $4

U.S. FUNDS ONLY PLEASE. Canada: add $3 per year. Other foreign: add $6 per year.

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Obviously, I write this column a few weeks before this issue lands in your mailbox. It’s been a mild winter here in southeastern Ohio, but the first snow—two inches of it—fell overnight, decorating tree branches like frosting on a cake. It was deep enough to hide the daffodil sprouts emerging (too early) from their dormancy, but not cold enough to kill them. At least, not this time.

Even as the first wintry weather arrives, signs of spring are appearing: daffodil sprouts in my yard; and in the yard of our production director, Bruce, the first pine warbler of the year. That species is often the first migrating warbler to return, and is a sure sign that spring is on the way.

What will be next? Eastern phoebes can turn up year-round where I live, but soon I’ll be seeing more of them as migrants head north to breed. They’ll be increasingly vocal, too. Tree swallows should make their 2020 debut in just a few weeks. I’ve heard reports already of American woodcocks peenting in Midwestern meadows.

Spring officially begins on March 19. Who knows what the weather will be like then, but the sun will be rising earlier and setting later, which is always mood boosting (and an hour later, thanks to daylight saving time, which begins March 8). By then, maybe the daffodils will be brave enough, or foolish enough, or fooled by a warm spell, to send out some buds or even blossoms, and the chickadees, I hope, will have opted to use the nest box in my backyard.

Late winter is the season for anticipation, which brings hope. But as I write, it’s the season for wiping muddy dog feet several times a day, refilling my bird feeders surprisingly often, and for being grateful for those hardy little Carolina wrens, tufted titmice, house finches, and cardinals who stick it out here in southeastern Ohio despite the fickle weather. They brighten my kitchen window every day. I suspect Emily Dickenson wrote these words in late winter:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -

Thank you for reading Watching Backyard Birds, and here’s hoping for glorious spring, right around the corner.

Dawn Hewitt
WBB Team Captain
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It was the phoebe nest that did it, that made us willing to do anything to buy this property. I’m sure the seller saw it in our eyes. That worn little lump of moss and mud, plopped atop a pressure-treated 2x8 beneath the house’s raised deck, upped our ante clear to heaven.

Yes, he told us, phoebes had nested just that summer, and their cat had had a marvelous time watching the birds through the flooring as it crouched directly above them. I smiled and suppressed a scream—both Bill and I had gotten good at that in our nine months of till-then fruitless house hunting in southeastern Ohio. Searching for a rural property, we’d seen it all. Beautiful pieces of land,
with a house that begged not for repair, but to be bulldozed. Beautiful homes, with shiny new kitchens, that shook with each passing semitruck, or were planning a slow death march down an eroding hill. A fairly decent old farmhouse on land adjoining a state forest, where the neighbor boys staged a three-ring, all-terrain-vehicle extravaganza for our benefit. Rrrrrrr, yahoo!

And then here was this house, a pretty good house, on 40 acres of meadow and orchard and forest, with another 40 waiting to be bought, and it had the ultimate lucky sign—a nest of one of our very favorite birds right under the deck. As we walked the close-shaven meadow, I’d found a couple of bleached box turtle shells, victims of a too-low mower deck, and a too-enthusiastic mowing schedule. We’d fix that. There were problems, to be sure, with the water supply, the kitchen, the baths, and the floor plan, the stuff of future home improvement loans. For us, in that moment of discovery, the old farm with its hastily built, 1978-vintage house shone with perfection.

That was the autumn of 1992. We moved in that December. The phoebe nest melted away in the winter rains, and every spring thereafter, a phoebe came, sometimes for a day or two, sometimes for only a couple of hours, sang its cranky, wheezy song under our deck, and flew away. We put up little three-sided shelters under the deck, and under the garage eaves, and lay low whenever a phoebe appeared to investigate.
If crossed fingers made eggs, we’d be overrun with phoebes. Some springs, a male phoebe would declare his territory for over a week, finding song perches in the dead branches of buddleia, on plant brackets and our faded Adirondack chairs.

He sat on the deck railing, wagging his tail, and whisking up to nab sluggish houseflies against the south-facing siding. Our new home was without phoebes for seven years.

I’d pretend to ignore the males who declared our house their territory each year. I didn’t want them to see in my eyes how much I wanted each of them to find a mate and build a nest. I would have made mud for them, run a hose into my flower bed, if they would have been so kind as to slap it on a deck strut, line it with moss, and get busy.

In early April, the male phoebe starts singing at a few minutes after 7 each morning, and starts

All About Eastern Phoebes

A medium-sized (6-inch) fly-catcher, the eastern phoebe defines drabness. Olive-brown above and grayish white below, the phoebe has no striking field marks. Hatch-year birds may show a yellowish cast on the belly in fall, as well as dull cinnamon wing bars, but these are absent in adults. The phoebe’s best field mark is a constantly wagging tail, a sweet chip note, and the male’s somewhat harsh, annoyed-sounding Fee-bee! Fee-be-biddit! Fee-bee! song. The similar-looking eastern wood-pewee has noticeable wing bars and a smaller, more sharply peaked head, and does not bob its tail.

Eastern phoebes are among our earliest migrants, arriving on territory in early March in the southern part of their range. They overwinter from Virginia to southern Oklahoma, south through the Gulf states, feeding on fruits as well as the flying insects that make up the bulk of their diet. Phoebes are drawn to human-made structures such as barns, sheds, carports, and bridges, where they find ledges to place their nests. Bridges, in fact, are thought to play a part in the eastern phoebe’s range expansion westward.

The phoebe sits, tail wagging, on an exposed perch in the lower forest canopy or in an open yard, and sallies out after flying insects. It may pounce on invertebrates it sees.
earlier every day. He always wakes me up. I don’t mind. There’s something about this drab little flycatcher that I love, unreservedly. To me, a phoebe embodies bird-spirit, that charge of life that one bird can bring to an otherwise dull day. He’s always in motion, even at rest, flopping his loose-hinged tail, then whirling off to catch a flying insect. His magic has nothing to do with color; he defines drab, without even a wing bar or eye-ring for relief from his olive-brownness. But look in a phoebe’s eye, and it’s all there: the charm of a warbler, the zest of a kingbird. He’s a lot of bird, in deceptively simple packaging.

We have a friend, of whom we’re very fond, who lives not far from here. As long as he’s lived in these Appalachian foothills, he’s used guns to fell food, and occasionally to settle disputes. One was with a phoebe, who came one spring to put globs of wet mud atop a porch light by his front door. I wish I had a story of revelation and redemption to tell, but I don’t. The phoebe lost. I think our friend made a mistake there, but perhaps the bigger mistake was in ever telling us what he’d done. I guess I have a skewed outlook on phoebes, because it would never occur to me to consider the inevitable mess beneath their

on the ground or take small fruits such as sumac and poison ivy when insects become scarce.

Vigorous singing and defense of the nest site constitute most of the courtship behavior of eastern phoebes. They may place small amounts of nesting material on the intended site well before nest building commences. Phoebes are strongly tied to their scarce and time-honored nest sites; narrow ledges protected from weather and predators are hard to find. Phoebes readily accept small nesting platforms erected in otherwise inhospitable nest sites, such as under house eaves or in corrugated metal culvert pipes. This monogamous species displays high site fidelity, with the same pair returning for three or more consecutive years.

The nest has a wet mud foundation, with grass stems, green moss, and a lining of animal hair and fine grasses. Existing nests may be renovated and reused for many years. Five white eggs are incubated for 16 days. Young phoebes stay in the nest for 16 to 18 days, by which time they are fully feathered and able to fly. Phoebe nests may “explode” with flying young if approached too closely at or near fledging time, but fledglings may return to sleep in the old nest for several nights after fledging. They are fed by the adults for two more weeks as they gain strength and foraging skills. —Julie Zickefoose .Executive Editor
nests an annoyance, much less a death sentence. It goes, part and parcel, with the joy of having phoebes around.

But then, I once climbed up into my landlord’s garage rafters and hung an old umbrella upside down under a barn swallow nest to save his truck from their copious fallout and to spare them any possible consequences of his annoyance. Barn swallows, like phoebes, are worth it. Watch swallows skim low over the lawn in the sidelight of a summer evening; watch a phoebe whirl out and snap a passing cranefly, then fetch up on a dead branch, and then imagine the scene without their spark.

Seven years later, it happened. A pair of phoebes built a nest atop a television relay box under the deck. Four eggs hatched in mid-May. All four young fledged, bursting from their nest all at once on their 17th day. Only three days later the female phoebe was relining the tired little nest for another clutch of eggs.

When our daughter was born, she had the spark in her eyes. As a tiny newborn, she’d whip around when anyone entered the room, and track them, holding their eyes in her smoky blue gaze. She still has them, 23 years later, those wise eyes. An old soul, someone once said. Before I knew she was a girl, before she ever came, she had a name: Phoebe. It had belonged to a great-aunt of mine, I was told after we’d picked it. That’s nice, I thought, but it’s really the bird I’m naming her for. Everyone knew that.

House deal, firstborn’s name; how can a person base such momentous decisions on such a nondescript little flycatcher? You’d have to know the phoebe. That dusky little flycatcher lives in my heart. Today, my daughter, Phoebe, thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship, teaches English on the Canary Islands. I think about the great blessing of having a Phoebe in my house for 18 years, and the small blessings now packed into a decrepit mud-and-moss nest under our deck.
In addition to the eastern phoebe, two other phoebe species exist in the world, and both reside in North America. Say’s phoebe nests from northern Alaska south to northern Mexico, and migrates south to winter from southern British Columbia south into Mexico. It can be found as far east as the Great Plains, and on rare occasion, it turns up in the East. It can be found year-round from the Pacific Northwest to West Texas. Slightly larger than the other two phoebes, it has a pale rufous belly and undertail, contrasting with a black tail.

The black phoebe is a year-round resident along the Pacific Coast from southern Washington into Mexico. Its range extends inland as far as western Texas. It, too, has an entirely black tail, but otherwise, its plumage is dark above with a white belly. Black phoebes are most commonly spotted along streams or ponds.

Phoebes are in the flycatcher family and are usually seen on prominent, open perches, watching for flying insects to catch and consume. For that reason, they’re not likely to dine at or under your bird feeders.

All three phoebes wag their tail nonstop—a distinguishing characteristic, and all three species nest most commonly on human-made structures, such as under eaves or bridges, or on top of sheltered light fixtures. 

Western Phoebes

Say’s phoebe.

Black phoebe.
Al Batt is a writer, speaker, storyteller, and humorist. His first book is a collection of his stories, *A Life Gone to the Birds*, published by *BWD Press.*

— Al Batt

Mark Beltaire wrote, “The nicest thing about the promise of spring is that sooner or later, she’ll have to keep it.”

The spring migrants had arrived. Birds were chirping and burping. The birds provide a touch of wildness for everyone.

A male cardinal sang *what cheer, what cheer, cheer cheer cheer!* He sang in hopes of attracting a female cardinal. I wanted to get a closer look at the redbird, but I wasn’t carrying my binoculars. A birder not carrying binoculars is a cardinal sin!
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