

POLYGYNOUS MATING IN EASTERN PHOEBE

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ABSTRACT

A polygynous male Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is reported from Essex County New York, Town of Elizabethtown in the Adirondack Park. The chronology of the nesting is described and some possible explanations are offered for this behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is one of the easiest bird species to observe. They often build their mud nest near human habitation under the eaves of houses, porches, garages, sheds etc. They arrive early and are nature's ultimate harbinger of spring. Over the last six (6) seasons I have documented their arrival at Elizabethtown (Essex County), which is at 900 feet elevation in the Adirondacks. On average they arrive April 10, with a range from April 3 through April 19. In 1998 they arrived on April 11.

OBSERVATIONS

In May I found two (2) active phoebe nests within 67 feet of each other. Stokes (1985) says "the size of their territory is several acres, and territories are usually well dispersed so there are few interactions between neighbors." Wallace (1955) describes the species as "monogamous." Quite early therefore, I suspected that I was observing unusual nesting behavior in this species.

At first I thought I must be observing either a polygynous male, or two separate pairs with territories very close to each other. In either case I thought it deserved further study. As the season progressed I was able to determine that there were only three (3) birds in the vicinity of these two nests, two incubating females and a lone male. I concluded that the male was polygynous.

Over the next few months I documented the chronology of their nesting. The primary female (female that started nesting first) started

laying eggs on May 13, and she eventually had a clutch of five (5) eggs that began to hatch on June 1. On June 15 the young from this nest fledged.

The secondary female had only four (4) eggs in her nest on May 29. On June 10 the eggs began to hatch, and by June 28 the young had fledged. Therefore the young in the primary nest fledged in 14 days, and the young in the secondary nest fledged in 18 days, even though there was one less bird in the secondary nest to feed.

In the secondary nest only the female at first fed the young. It wasn't until the young had fledged in the primary nest that the male was free to help his second mate with feeding. I didn't observe him feeding the young in the secondary nest until June 17. This may explain the longer fledging period of the young in the secondary nest.

While both females were actively feeding young in their respective nests, they seemingly avoided crossing paths by each foraging in different parts of their nesting territory. I only saw one interaction between the two females, which occurred shortly after young from the primary nest fledged. That day, the secondary female flew down beside one of the fledged young and was quickly chased away by the primary female.

Two weeks after young in the secondary nest fledged I still saw the pair feeding young. If either of the two females produced a second brood they did not do so in the vicinity of the original nesting site. In conclusion, the male by having two mates was able to pass his genes on to nine young, rather than only five.

"Ornithologists long believed that up to 94% of bird species were monogamous" (Morton 1995). New studies using genetic testing techniques have shown that even the most devoted of partners often "sleep around." Is the polygynous mating in phoebes that I observed sporadic promiscuity in an otherwise monogamous species? How often does it occur in this species? Welty and Baptista (1988) says that "a number of species that are normally monogamous occasionally shift into polygamous pair bonds." Is the Eastern Phoebe another documented case of this phenomenon? In this case what were the factors that encouraged the male to take two mates? Did it have anything to do with the unusual weather of 1998. Can we attribute it to El Nino? As in other species did it have something to do with a skewed sex ratio (females outnumbering males). Was the secondary female "widowed" perhaps, causing the male to enlarge his territory to include his "widowed" neighbor? All these are possibilities. Even ordinary birds, like phoebes, provide a never ending supply of questions.

LITERATURE CITED

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