

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Fishing Phoebes in East Hampton, NY

One of the unexpected and happier benefits of a year spent working from home in East Hampton was the opportunity to observe some of our rarer winter birds on a regular basis. In addition to a Rufous Hummingbird, which appeared at our feeders in early December 2020 and remained until the end of January 2021, we had a pair of Baltimore Orioles which lingered through the winter, taking advantage of the hummingbird feeders when other food supplies dwindled. Our biggest surprise, however, was an intrepid Eastern Phoebe, which also remained well-fed through the winter by teaching itself how to fish!

The bird was observed initially at the inlet of Georgica Cove where there is a parking area and a large drainage pipe that moves storm runoff from Cove Hollow Road into the pond. This somewhat constant flow of fresh water remains a feature of the Cove year round, and provides an active habitat for an abundance of very small fish (possibly rainwater killifish/mummichogs).

We had been watching the overwintering phoebe since mid-February, perching in a tree or on a branch above the Cove. It would fly in close to the muddy water near the drainage pipe, usually sitting on a phragmite or similar reedy plant, behavior that seemed appropriate for catching insects near the pond; but in February, of course, there were no insects. Observing our photos in early March, we were able to detect fish in the beak, which were promptly swallowed (photo, p. 156). We then followed the bird more closely over several days (and with other observers) and could see that it dipped into the muddy water (faster than we were able to catch in a photo), grab a fish and then return to the tree branch to eat it. The bird did not actually dive (as nearby kingfishers do) and of course did not snatch any fish in the air, as the fish don't emerge from the water.

The phoebe was first reported in eBird on 12 January. Though not observed by these authors, on 31 January, two Eastern Phoebes were seen together and reports of two appeared again on 20 and 21 February. One observer noted that both were fishing, though he never saw them doing it simultaneously. There were subsequent reports of one individual through 15 March.

A search of the literature reveals only two reports of this species catching fish, both in the Chicago area (Jung 1926: The season. Chicago region. *Bird-Lore* 28: 63-64; Binford 1957: Eastern Phoebes fishing. *Auk* 74: 264-265). The last reported evidence of an Eastern Phoebe fishing was in 1956, so you can imagine that there was quite a bit of excitement among the evolutionary biologists and ornithologists who began following the East Hampton birds. Over a few weeks we continued to observe one of the birds fishing quite successfully. We assume that by late March it resumed its regular diet of insects.

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