

Wild Wednesday 9 December 2020. Phoebes, by Walt Anderson

It's that time of year when most self-respecting flycatchers are basking in the tropics—where the flies are! We have two exceptions here in Arizona, both phoebes: Say's and Black. The former is attired like a modest robin, while the latter sees things in black and white. It amazes me that they find enough bugs to fill their bellies in these cold months.

Black Phoebes are resident in most of Arizona, though northern ones shift south and downslope a bit in winter, and a few wander as far as NE Arizona on migration. They have strong affinities to water—even a cattle tank or swimming pool will suffice to make suitable habitat. Nest records in Arizona occur from as low as 90 feet to as high as 9300 feet! That's elevation, not nesting height.

Say's Phoebes are even more widely distributed in the state than are the Black Phoebes. They prefer open country and are less dependent on water, though common enough there too. In summer, they migrate as far north as Alaska and NW Canada, breeding throughout the West. They pull back in range in winter to the southern third of the state and much of Mexico.

Both belong to the family Tyrannidae, the "tyrant flycatchers," though the phoebes do not share the tyrannical mobbing behavior of their cousins, the kingbirds. In fact, there are few birds that seem as gentle and endearing as phoebes. There are more than 430 species in this New World family, making it the most speciose of all bird families. Some flycatcher species present identification challenges because of superficial similarity, but our two western phoebes are pretty easy.

Like most flycatchers, phoebes have large heads and broad, flattened bills with rictal bristles at the base. [Make sure your autocorrect function doesn't change "rictal" on you!] Phoebes are sit-and-wait predators, sallying out to catch insects in the air or on the ground. The Black Phoebe often calls even while pursuing a flying insect.

Both species build nests that typically are sheltered from open sky. They use caves, bridges, buildings, mines, and other protected sites. Both species line nests with fine materials like grasses, mosses, rootlets, hair, and bark, but the Black Phoebe, as its hydrophilic tendencies allow, uses pellets of mud for the basic structure. They often will build upon or refurbish old nests. Nest sites are safe from most predators, though scrub-jays take eggs or young at times.

Because phoebes use human-built structures and have little fear of humans, they coexist quite peacefully with us. Now if only we could take the hint and get along with each other similarly!



The Say's Phoebe prefers open country with perches from which it can spot insect prey on the ground or in the air. It has incredible maneuverability in flight and can hover when needed. Its breeding range extends all the way from Mexico to the Arctic tundra, farther north than for any other flycatcher.



The Black Phoebe is a water-lover, where there usually are good insect populations. They have been known to snatch small fish from the surface occasionally.



Phoebes have typical flycatcher builds, with large heads and upright posture. Broad, flattened bills have rictal bristles basally and a sharp hook. Sexes are alike. Both phoebes dip their tails in a characteristic wagging motion.



Phoebes have little fear of humans, so we call them “confiding,” though what they are confiding is open to interpretation! Apologies for the phoeble humor.



Not flashy like their Vermilion Flycatcher cousins, phoebes have their own subtle beauty.



A Black Phoebe in typical wetland habitat. Climate change is going to affect many bird ranges adversely, but the National Audubon Society projects that the Black Phoebe will expand its range northward, becoming a bird to be expected in places such as southern Washington, Idaho, and much of Utah.



Success! Not all insect prey will be your average fly. Even small fish can be snatched from the water surface on occasion.



An old Black Phoebe nest after the young have fledged. The old nest may be built over or repaired for another nesting cycle. Here you can see the mud pellets that the female used as she constructed the nest by herself. Of course, she laid the eggs (average 4), but the male does help bring home the bacon (that is, insect prey) for the family.



Walt Anderson

Eggs hatch asynchronously, so the young phoebes vary in size. They are altricial and helpless at first, but they grow quickly and leave the nest in two to three weeks. Notice that this Say's Phoebe nest differs from that of the Black Phoebe by lacking mud pellets. This nest was in a shallow cave in tafoni, a sculpted and pitted cliff of rhyolitic tuff.



Phoebes are probably more abundant now than they were in prehistoric times, since humans have created so many perches and potential nesting sites. Old cabins and bridges are ideal, and some nests have even been found in derelict cars. One phoebe built a nest in a pair of trousers hanging out to dry! The owner of said trousers helped out by tying a knot in the pants leg so that nesting material no longer fell out. Now that's being bird-friendly!

Willow Lake, Yavapai County, Prescott, Arizona. By Walt Anderson

Arizona is way more than the Grand Canyon and the Sonoran Desert. I feel lucky to live in central Arizona with access to most major biotic communities in the state within an hour or two. Even better, the Prescott area is super-diverse with a very comfortable climate—the Goldilocks Effect, I think.

This past week in early December, I experienced some of that wildlife diversity along the shore of Willow Lake and felt compelled to share some of the highlights I captured with my light-and-lovely Sony RX10 IV. Enjoy!



Bald Eagle pair surveying the lake below with its banquet table of waterfowl by the hundreds.



Just upstream where the riparian corridor along Willow Creek approaches the lake, the night shift of avian predators hangs out. Great Horned Owls breed consistently in this grove.



Nice landing!



Walt Anderson

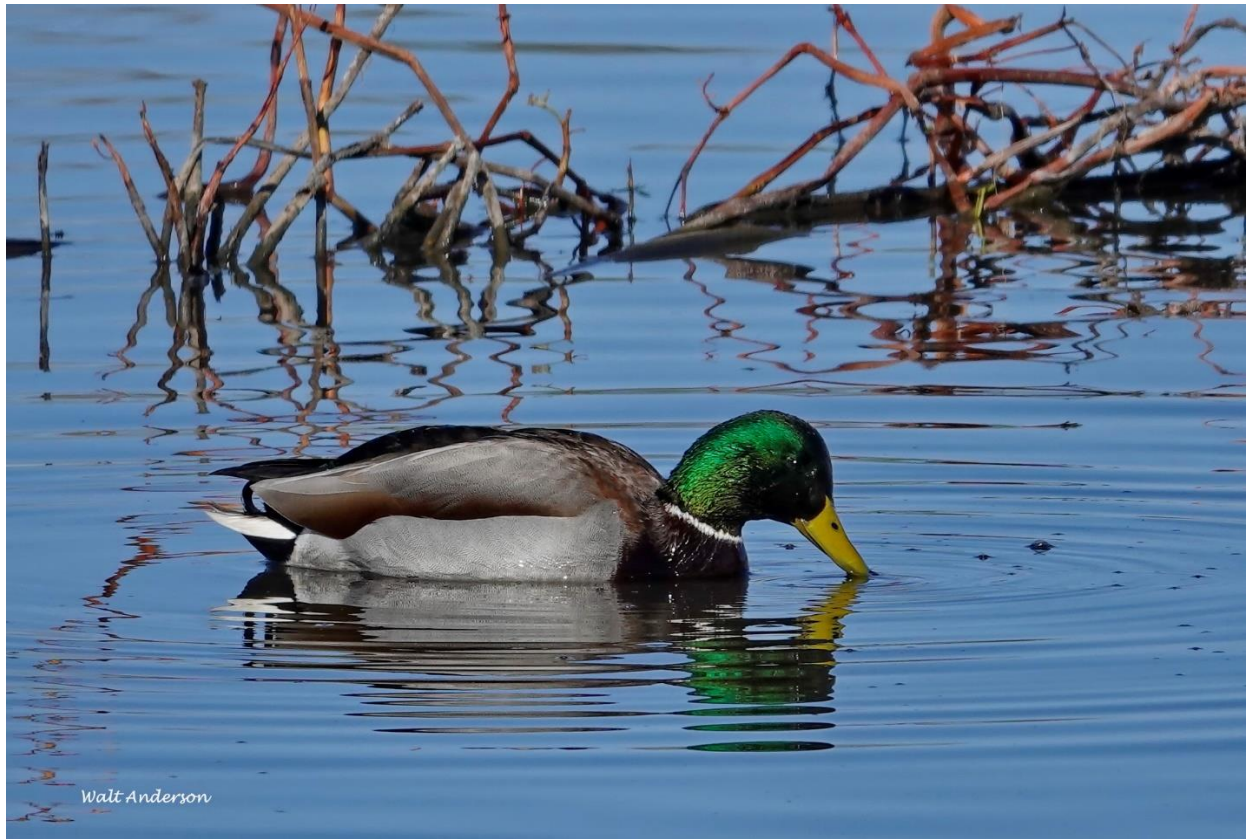
Great Egret in its stalking feet.



Success!



Green-winged Teal along the shore.



Mallard and Pintail drakes in fine plumage.



American Pipit.



Western Meadowlark



Song Sparrow