

## Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe*



**Folk Name:** Bridge Robin, House Pewee, Winter Pee-wee

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Fairly Common

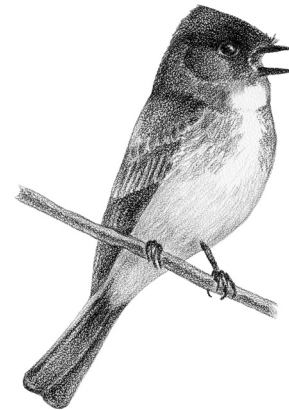
**Habitat:** Open habitats nesting under bridges, building eaves, horizontal ledges

The Eastern Phoebe is arguably our best known flycatcher. It is the only member of the Tyrannidae family found here year-round, and it is our most common breeding flycatcher. It is also easy to identify. Many people know its distinctive buzzy call, slowly repeating its name: *phe-be...phe-be...phe-be*. Many know this bird from its habit of building a nest of mud and moss under the eaves of houses and buildings, or on horizontal ledges of barns or under bridges. Some people recognize this bird from its regular tail-wagging behavior, which can be easily observed any time the phoebe perches on a wire or dead branch:

“The strange thing about a Phoebe’s tail is that it jerked every time he spoke.”

—*The Charlotte News*, May 30, 1921

Like our other flycatchers, the phoebe is an insectivorous bird, but unlike them it often eats wild berries or occasionally seeds, allowing it to survive here during the winter when insects and spiders are hard to find. The phoebe has even been known to, albeit very rarely, catch and eat tiny minnows. The winter status of the phoebe in the region appears to have changed somewhat over the past century. Leverett Loomis recorded this bird as “rather” common in winter in Chester in the late 1800s. Elizabeth Clarkson noted that “occasional winter records” were taken in Charlotte before World War II, but since



then, winter numbers appear to have been increasing.

An analysis of local Christmas Bird Count data illustrates this increase. The Eastern Phoebe did not make the list of the top 50 most common birds during the early years of the Charlotte CBC (based on twenty-year comparisons indexed per party-hour). Today, it ranks 39th. (See CBC comparison table in Appendix.) Rising average winter temperatures result in increased insect activity which means more food choices for phoebes, so they are more easily able to survive the winter.

It is important to note that periods of unusually cold weather can occur during any winter season and these pose a serious risk to all wintering birds. A series of snow storms surprised Gaston County residents in early 1960 resulting in the deaths of many birds, including the Eastern Phoebe. This event sparked a community conversation on the plight of birds and spurred interest in establishing backyard “bird cafeterias” to help the birds make it through that difficult winter.



Eastern Phoebe nest on downspout. (Phil Fowler)



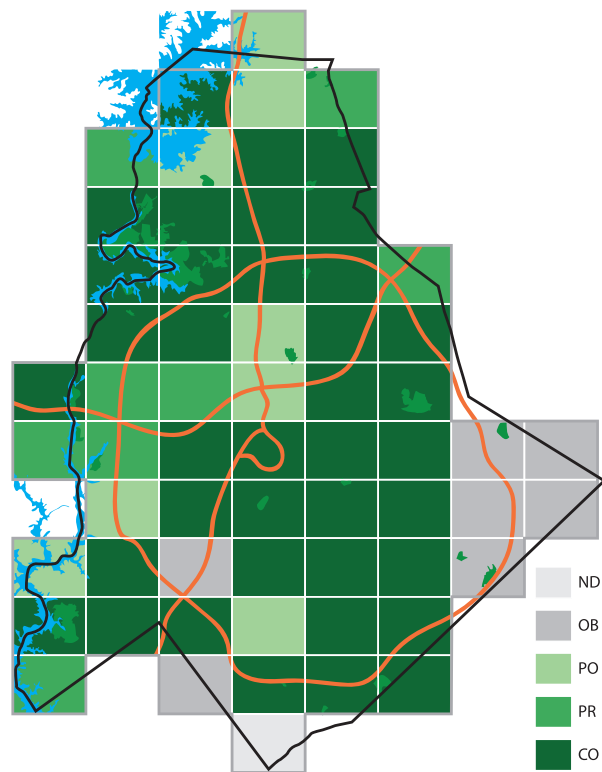
Eastern Phoebe nestling. (Jim Guyton)

The breeding status of the Eastern Phoebe has changed in our region as well. Today, the phoebe breeds throughout the Carolina Piedmont, but this was not the case in our South Carolina counties around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1890, Leverett Loomis, who was widely regarded for his thorough ornithological observations, wrote: “At the town of Chester, I have never met with the Phoebe during the month of June,” but he did report hearing them in June in Spartanburg County, and he confirmed breeding in Greenville and Pickens counties. Two decades later Arthur T. Wayne continued to report the phoebe as a breeding resident only in the “mountainous portions” of South Carolina. During the early 1900s, the breeding range of the phoebe began expanding into the South Carolina Piedmont. By the 1920s, breeding was confirmed in Spartanburg County and later in Cherokee County. Breeding continued to expand eastward throughout the South Carolina Piedmont in the latter half of the twentieth century, and today the Eastern Phoebe breeds in much of the Sandhills region as well.

The Eastern Phoebe is one of our early spring nesting birds. Mating and nesting begin in March. William McIlwaine provided this account of five eggs laid in Charlotte by 8 April in 1929:

From under one of the suspension bridges over Briarwood Creek as it crosses the Myers Park Golf Course, I saw come a pair of phoebes. The books talk so much about phoebes’ nests under bridges that I have been looking for them in such places. Well, I looked again. There it was! Very characteristic of moss, mud, etc. and five of the prettiest pure-white eggs. With the golfers going, going over that swinging, swaying bridge you’d think the eggs would have addled. But so far everything is fine.

In April 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson shared: “Two people have reported Phoebe’s nests with four eggs each also on the 8th.” In recent years (2011–2016), repeated observations of two nest sites, one under a bridge and one under the eaves of a house, indicate egg laying begins regularly in the region by the fourth week of March.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/8, CO/38)*