

FIELD NOTES

The Phoebe and the Spiketail

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Along the possibly thousands of miles of logging roads in eastern and northern Maine, at every major stream crossing, under each bridge, there is usually a nesting pair of Eastern Phoebes (*Sayornis phoebe*).

One of my favorite logging roads is the Spectacle Pond Road, which runs northwest 15.7 miles, from Route 193 in Beddington to Route 9 (the Airline) in Aurora. At mile 2.6 (from Route 193) is a small, stony, southward flowing stream crossing the road. On May 1, 2001, I briefly visit this site; a pair of phoebes is already present, obviously nesting under the bridge. I do not visit the site again until July 21. Now there are five to six phoebes present; the nesting pair has been successful and there are several recently fledged young. All these phoebes are busy hunting from perches along the stream.

This is a drought year in eastern Maine; the water level in the stream is very low, so I can easily wade along hunting for odonates. I manage to collect three specimens for the MDDS (Maine Damselfly and Dragonfly Survey) project. One of these specimens is the twin-spotted spiketail (*Cordulegaster maculata*).

After my walk along the stream, I return to the road and stand on the bridge overlooking the stream. Several twin-spotted spiketails are patrolling the stream just under the bridge. I watch the phoebes busy hawking for insects. One of the phoebes flies from its perch down to the stream and catches a big dragonfly. It returns to the perch with a large spiketail in its bill. It has grasped the dragonfly by the head and thorax (see Figure 1). The bird proceeds to swallow the dragonfly “whole,” wings and all. The bird gulps and gasps, and the dragonfly gradually disappears inside the bird. An amazing feat, a 2.6-inch dragonfly swallowed by a 7-inch bird. 🐦

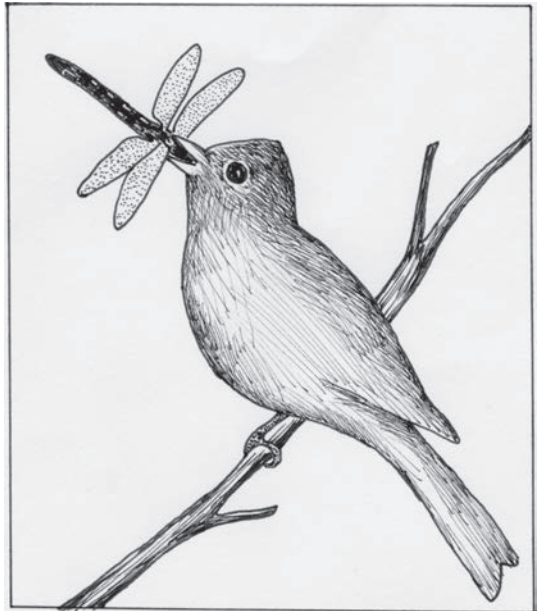


Figure 1. Sketch by the author