

The Eastern Phoebe as a Summer Resident in Mississippi

Ben B. Coffey, Jr.
Coffey Grounds, 672 N. Belvedere
Memphis, Tennessee 38107

The Eastern Phoebe (Sayornis phoebe), as well as several other species, has been extending its summer range southward. We have checked on these range expansions as time allows. In the last 40 years we have gone under many bridges to check for Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica) and phoebe nests - possibly up to 300 occasions in Mississippi, 180 in West Tennessee and 120 in eastern and southern Arkansas. Since the Barn Swallow has outstripped the phoebe in this southward extension and its forward edge has been too distant for me to check readily, such field work has been minimal for the last decade or so. Therefore, many of the data presented are for earlier seasons. Also, after going under a certain bridge several seasons with positive results, we later checked the presence of a phoebe and did not go under that bridge.

When we mentioned southward extension, we actually seem to have, here on the eastern portion of the immediate Mississippi River plain, local movements from the northeast to southwest. We found the first nest of the Barn Swallow in Shelby County (Memphis), Tennessee, on 25 June 1936, and the first phoebe nest (coincidentally under the same bridge) on 3 May 1947. The first Barn Swallow nest reported for Mississippi (Warriner, Migrant 9:64, 1938) was in a dairy barn near Corinth, 25 May 1938; disregarding the Ship Island population discovered by McIlhenny (Auk 50:439 and 52:188) about 1 July 1933. The first phoebe nest reported in Mississippi was found by Andrew A. Allison on 27 April 1904, just inside a former "silica mine", southeast of Eastport, in Tishomingo County.

In the early 1930's we looked in spring and early summer for the phoebes in the narrow branch valleys feeding into the Tennessee River, north of luka. We found occasional rock ledges, but no nests. Pickwick Lake covered these outcroppings later. Northeast Mississippi Boy Scouts told me of a phoebe nest at Tishomingo State Park in 1937. On 3 July 1938 we found this nest and one of the year under a bluff rock near the picnic grounds, but we saw no phoebes. Enroute home we detoured towards Eastport and found the home where Allison spent a month in the spring of 1904 (Auk 24:12-25, 1907, referred to in Migrant 14:70-72, 1943). Mr. Walter Lee Goodman led us to the "old chalk" mine and on 4 July 1938 we found two adult phoebes and a nest with 4 young. On 19 May 1940 and 17 May 1947 we found only evidence of past nesting. We returned to Tishomingo State Park in June 1939 for a week (Migrant 10:50-56, 1939) and found 8 nesting sites on rock; these were on both sides of the Bear Creek escarpment. Four had nests of the season and 4 had remnants of older nests. On many subsequent trips to this park we found nests, old or in use, on the 1937-38 site and under a wood bridge over Gardner branch. Elsewhere in Tishomingo County we located 6 sites under U.S. Highway 72 bridges on 23 June 1956. We found phoebes at the sites in later years.

The first site we found phoebes outside of Tishomingo County was in Benton County, an area worked more by us than any other Mississippi County

except DeSoto. At the Wolf River on Miss. 7, we saw a phoebe at the north bridge, and a phoebe and nest with 4 eggs under the south bridge on 27 April 1941. On 20 April 1947 it appeared that there were at least three pairs of phoebes nesting under the bridges there. We have noted the species there in subsequent years. Other trips, but especially in 1955 and 1956, revealed at least 15 other nesting sites at slightly better than 50% of the bridges we went under in Benton County.

The following notes summarize our observations of phoebes in other Mississippi counties:

Marshall County: Only a few bridges have been checked. The Memphis Chapter of the T.O.S. has a late March fieldtrip each year to Wall Doxey (formerly Spring Lake) State Park, 7 miles south of Holly Springs. Since 26 March 1950, one or more phoebes have been seen each year at a nest site or sites, with possibly transient phoebes elsewhere around the lake. Nests have generally been under the porch of the lodge.

Lafayette County: 25 March 1956, a double layer nest was found under the Tallahatchie bridge, Miss. 7. Apparently this site was used by phoebes as early as 1954. On 20 May 1956 we found a phoebe at second bridge on Miss. 30 east of Oxford, but none at 4 other bridges (Miss. 7 north). On 12 June 1960 we saw a phoebe at Yocona River bridge on Miss. 7. Under the center span of this bridge we found a double phoebe nest and 7 partially completed nests.

Yalobusha County: We had mostly negative observations along Miss. 7 on 20 May 1956 and 17 June 1957, but found two nests on the first date north of Water Valley.

Union County: Undoubtedly the phoebe nests here, but we rarely looked for it. On 20 May 1956 a phoebe was seen near Etta, but no nest was found under the bridge (part inaccessible).

Tippah County: On 23 June 1956 we found no phoebes on Miss. 15, but a series of bridges (two bottoms) on U.S. 72 east of Walnut yielded 5 nests (young in one) and an old nest of the season. We found single nests on Miss. 4, 31 May 1959, and on Miss. 30, 11 June 1961.

Alcorn County: On 4 March 1956 we found 2 nests under a bridge on U.S. 45. On 23 June 1956 we found a nest with young on Miss. 2 at Tusculumbia Creek; there were no phoebes at Kossuth. On 31 May 1959, just east of Rienzi, we located two nests with two half-nests adjacent.

Prentiss County: On 11 June 1961 we observed a phoebe at a West Miss. 30 bridge.

Itawamba County: On 17 May 1959 along Miss. 23 at Bull Mountain Creek there were phoebe nests under 4 of 5 bridges including a 2 and a 3-high stacked nest. Along the same highway near Red Bay we saw a phoebe sitting on a nest near another nest with dead young. A second bridge had no nests, but the third bridge in that series had a phoebe in view, though it was not

possible to look for a nest. On the same day we saw a phoebe on U.S. 78, east of Miss. 25.

Monroe County: On 7 July 1951 we saw a phoebe west of Aberdeen on Miss. 8

Chickasaw County: On several trips we checked all bridges on Miss. 15 from Pontotoc to Houston without much luck. This seemed the best route for checking southward expansion. About June, 1954, we found a phoebe and a nest with eggs under a bridge inside the north section of Houston. North of Houston on 26 June 1956 we found a nest with young under the south bridge at Houlika Creek. Fifteen other bridges, chiefly on Miss. 8 and north on U.S. 45 alternate (formerly Miss. 45W), were checked but no nests were found; we did see two phoebes at one site. On 24 May 1964 there was a phoebe nest in a concrete box culvert on the Natchez Trace, a mile south of Miss. 389 and eight miles south of Houston. At other times we have checked southward on the Natchez Trace Parkway without further luck. This includes a few culverts and bridges checked on 27 May and 15 June 1976 from Kosciusko to near Houston.

Kemper County: On 22 May 1966 we found a phoebe and a nest, of about three years use, in a Miss. 397 culvert, .4 mile south of Miss. 21, near Preston. This is about 146 miles south of the Tennessee line. Unfortunately, the first Houston nest was on my mind as being southernmost and I forgot this site and failed to check it after ending our Scooba breeding bird count, two miles south of Preston, 1972-1976. Incidentally, no phoebes were seen on these counts.

Panola County: On the Cockrum breeding bird count, 8 June 1975, Ernest Restivo found a phoebe just inside the county and northeast of Sardis.

DeSoto County: While the Barn Swallow extended its summer range down through the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the phoebe apparently has avoided it. The bluff which borders the Delta on the east passes between Eudora and Banks. There in the Chickasaw Bluff Lakes subdivision two phoebes, one on a nest, were seen 18 April 1975 by Lula Coffey, Helen Dinkelspiel, and Alice Smith. The nest was on a floor joist; because of a ravine the first floor was very high and the space underneath open. On 29 March 1964 we saw a phoebe at the Coldwater River bridge on U.S. 78.

Jerome A. Jackson, David Werschkul, Robert Howell, and Tom Darden (Mississippi Kite 6:6, 1976) report on recent nests and sites, two in Oktibbeha County and eight in Chickasaw County.

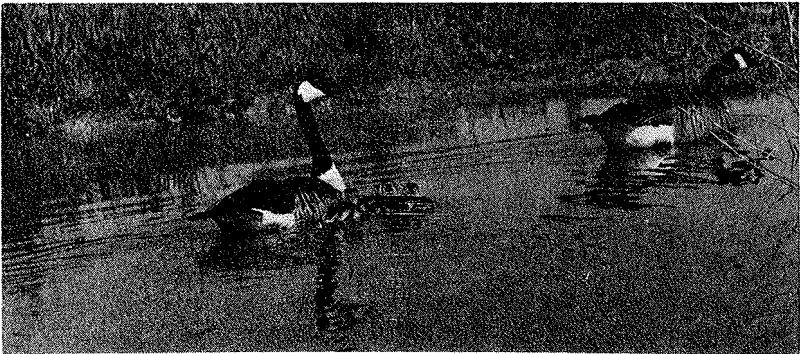
In addition to culverts and bridges, picnic pavilions and buildings (under the eaves) should be checked for nests. A number of our nests were on steel beams of bridges and many others were under wood bridges. Many of the latter bridges have probably been replaced in recent years. On 26 March 1961 at Wall Doxey we found 2 recent phoebe nests, each atop the large outer globe of a ceiling electric light; one on the lodge porch, the other at a nearby shed. Often a phoebe builds a second or a third nest

atop the first. Occasionally two or more nests may be built side by side but usually only one is completed. In May 1956 R. D. Smith found a nest built on each side of an old nest, one with 2 eggs and one with 3 eggs. (In 1930 under a R.R. bridge near Mammoth Springs, Arkansas, I found 13 nests side by side on a steel beam, ranging in size from a start to two completed nests.)

Where possible we did not disturb a bird on a nest. Accessible nests were examined by using a mirror. Besides the example above, nests with eggs were: Benton County - 20 April 1947: 5; 27 April 1941: 4; (same site as the first); 31 May 1959 and 31 May 1969 (different areas): 4; 9 June 1959: 4 and another with 2 eggs plus 2 young; 19 June 1955: 2, 3, and 3 respectively. At Tishomingo State Park, 18 May 1947, we found a small "chicken snake" in the nest (under an overhanging rock) with 5 eggs inside the snake.

Young found in nests were as follows: Benton County - 19 June 1955, 2 freshly dead (about 8 days old). At the Tishomingo tunnel Allison reported 4 young a few days old, 27 April 1904; ours there 4 July 1938, a week old. At the state park, 16 June 1939, 2 eggs and 2 young just out. On 23 June 1956; 4 young ready to fly, Tippah County; the same, Alcorn County; three nests in Tishomingo County had: young ready to leave, young half-grown, and one left, about half-grown. On 26 June 1956, Chickasaw County, an adult was feeding young in the nest. I would judge that the species normally has two broods a year.

Lula C. Coffey was with me on most of the fieldtrips and quite a number of other birders in turn on some of the trips. I offer thanks to them and especially to R. Demett Smith, Jr. who also made many trips alone in the Ashland area of Benton County and gave me his field cards and notes.



Giant Canada Geese, Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, April 1971.
(photo by Burton S. Webster)