



Extra-limital Breeding Record for Eastern Phoebe in the Creston Valley, British Columbia

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Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) breeds locally where suitable habitat exists, from northeastern British Columbia and southeastern Yukon Territory eastward across the northern Canadian provinces into the southeastern United States (Weeks 1994, Campbell et al. 1997, Sinclair et al. 2003). In British Columbia, there are three isolated nesting records well south of its normal breeding range in the province. These include active nests found near Mackenzie (Lambie 2009) and Clucultz Lake (Campbell et al. 2010) in the central interior and Spillimacheen in southeastern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1997).

In the Creston valley of southeastern British

Columbia, Eastern Phoebe is considered a casual species with two known occurrences (Van Damme 2009). The first phoebe was discovered on 6 May 1989 when a male was heard and observed singing under a highway bridge in West Creston (Gary S. Davidson and Linda Van Damme pers. obs., Campbell et al. 1997). The second occurrence, on 27 May 2009, was a single bird observed singing along Channel Road, at the north end of the valley, by Colin and Linda Young. It was still present on 28 and 29 May, singing from a red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) shrub and power line wires (Gary Breault and Marcia Long pers. comm., Preston and Campbell 2009).



Figure 1. An incubating Eastern Phoebe left its nest to perch and forage for insects within close proximity to its nesting site. *Photo by Linda M. Van Damme, Creston, BC, 9 July 2010.*

On 8 July 2010, while I was monitoring a Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) colony under a bridge in West Creston, a flycatcher appeared on a steel beam and briefly preened itself. In typical flycatcher style, it sallied out from its perch and caught a large insect, then flew to a wooden support beam and “bashed” the insect several times before consuming it. I was keenly interested when I observed the Eastern Phoebe fly to a well concealed nest built atop a collapsed section of a Cliff Swallow mud nest. Visible below the nest and clinging to spider webbing were fragments of bright green moss, a material used by phoebes for nest building (Campbell et al. 1997).

I returned the following afternoon to find the phoebe sitting in its nest. At one point it flew from the nest and landed on a barbed wire fence where it made successful forays to catch insects (Figure 1). Returning to its nest, the phoebe shifted its body back and forth as though settling on eggs. Repeat visits on 13 and 18 July found the phoebe sitting low in its nest. On 20 July, it was busy flycatching under the bridge and out over the water before landing under the bridge where it engaged in a long preening session. Again its behaviour on return to the nest indicated that it was settling on eggs. By 23 July, the phoebe was frequently on and off the nest and when it landed on the nest rim, it peered into the nest before settling. I was curious whether the eggs had hatched or were close to hatching as published incubation periods range from 13 to 18 days (Fannes 1980, Peck and James 1987, Weeks 1994).

I visited the nest site a few days later on 27 July, and again observed the phoebe frequently on and off the nest flycatching for insects, but I did not observe any food delivered to the nest. The phoebe also engaged in four bouts of preening and during that time the incubation patch was exposed. At 1730 hrs. on 30 July I visited the site again and waited 25 minutes before seeing the phoebe as it was not on its nest. When it appeared it was foraging and did not return to the nest during my stay. I surmised the phoebe was “topping up for the evening” as a major rain and wind storm occurred at 1830 hrs. The following day, I found the phoebe sitting in its nest. Each time it returned from foraging, it peered into the nest before resettling. Twenty-four days

had now passed since I first discovered the Eastern Phoebe nesting and I suspected that something was wrong as I had not observed nestlings being fed nor had I seen a mate.

On 3 August, the phoebe was not in the nest on my arrival and I waited 15 minutes before I spotted it foraging in a red-osier dogwood north of the bridge. It later flew to a perch and preened at great length before returning to the nest for 10 minutes. It promptly left the nest to capture a dragonfly under the bridge, then flew to a dogwood for another preening session. I heard it calling under the bridge before it flew out of sight toward a stand of black cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera*). As it turned out, this would be my last sighting; the phoebe was not observed on 4 and 5 August.

During the 27 days the Eastern Phoebe was present, only a single bird was observed and although the female alone incubates, the young are tended by both parents (Weeks 1994). This female had no mate so to help me solve the mystery of this event I felt it was important to peer into the nest to determine the contents. However, the nest was built in what appeared to be an inaccessible place under the bridge behind a steel plate and was at least 6 m (20 ft.) above water. Fortunately, a good friend was eager to assist and with a step ladder tied to a bridge piling was able to reach out across the water and hold a long-handled extension pole with a mirror mounted onto it while I photographed the image in the mirror from below. The nest contained five white eggs (Figure 2) which I concluded were infertile, resulting in the female eventually abandoning the nest.

Weeks (1994) suggested that the Eastern Phoebe is expanding its breeding range in North America, especially into areas of the Great Plains and the prairie provinces of Canada. He attributed this to an increase in buildings, bridges, and culverts following human settlement.

The nesting attempt in the Creston valley is the southernmost breeding record for British Columbia and is at least 780 km (471 mi) from its normal range in the northeastern part of the province. †

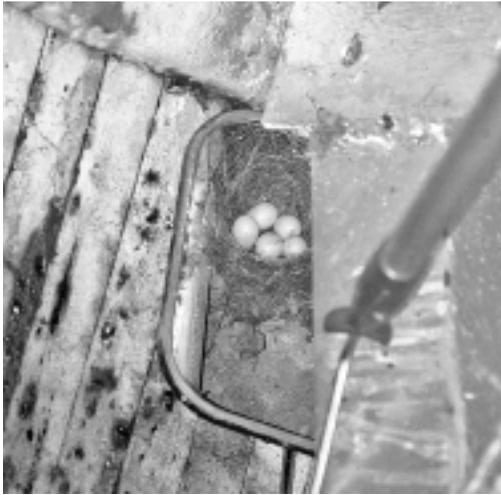


Figure 2. Two days after the female Eastern Phoebe abandoned the nest it was checked for contents that revealed five likely infertile eggs. *Photo by Linda M. Van Damme, Creston, BC, 5 August 2010.*

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About the author



Linda's continued interest in the bird life of the Creston valley has taught her that the more you learn, the less you know! Birds are dynamic and Linda feels privileged to have observed and documented many of these changes over the past 30 years. She is keen to record the annual breeding activity of birds, has conducted winter raptor surveys for almost two decades, and to collect bird sightings to update her 2009 bird checklist. Linda enjoys volunteering each year to help compile and write the annual British Columbia Nest Record Scheme report.