

# Eastern Phoebe

*Sayornis phoebe*

One of our most familiar eastern flycatchers, the Eastern Phoebe's raspy "phoebe" call is a frequent sound around yards and farms in spring and summer. These brown-and-white songbirds sit upright and wag their tails from prominent, low perches. They typically place their mud-and-grass nests in protected nooks on bridges, barns, and houses, which adds to the species' familiarity to humans. Hardy birds, Eastern Phoebes winter farther north than most other flycatchers and are one of the earliest returning migrants in spring.

## Keys to Identification

### Size and Shape

The Eastern Phoebe is a plump songbird with a medium-length tail. It appears large-headed for a bird of its size. The head often appears flat on top, but phoebes sometimes raise the feathers up into a peak. Like most small flycatchers, they have short, thin bills used for catching insects.

### Color Pattern

The Eastern Phoebe is brownish-gray above and off-white below, with a dusky wash to the sides of the breast. The head is typically the darkest part of the upperparts. Birds in fresh fall plumage show faint yellow on the belly and whitish edging on the folded wing feathers.

### Behavior

The Eastern Phoebe generally perches low in trees or on fence lines. Phoebes are very active, making short flights to capture insects and very often returning to the same perch. They make sharp "peep" calls in addition to their familiar "phoebe" vocalizations. When perched, Eastern Phoebes wag their tails down and up frequently.

### Habitat

These birds favor open woods such as yards, parks, woodlands, and woodland edges. Phoebes usually breed around buildings or bridges on which they construct their nests under the protection of an eave or ledge.

### Cool Facts

- In 1804, the Eastern Phoebe became the first banded bird in North America. John James Audubon attached silvered thread to an Eastern Phoebe's leg to track its return in successive years.

### Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 5.6 - 6.7 inches
- Wingspan - 10.2 - 11.0 inches
- Weight - 0.6 - 0.7 ounces

