

**RECORD #: 6-B-06**

IDAHO BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE  
RARE BIRD REPORT FORM

SPECIES:

Eastern Phoebe

REPORTER:

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OTHER OBSERVERS:

April 14 it was only me.  
April 15:  
Cliff and Lisa Weisse  
Darren Clark  
Bob Davis  
Marty from Pocatello

DATE REPORT PREPARED:

May 6, 2006 from notes taken April 14

DATE SIGHTING OCCURRED:

April 14 & 15, 2006

LOCALITY OF OBSERVATION:

Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area, near the town of Mud Lake in Jefferson County. All observations were at the "North Picnic Area" as shown on the map on page 229 in Svingen and Dumroese.

HABITAT:

Lake edge willows and larger deciduous trees

CONDITIONS:

On the 14th it was mostly cloudy with brief periods of rain (but no rain when I saw the bird). The 15th was also partly cloudy with no rain. The bird was seen in good light both days from about 20 feet on the 14th and 50 feet on the 15th. I used my Leica 10x42BN binoculars and took the photos with a Nikon Coolpix 4300 held up to a Kowa TSN-821 scope.

DID YOU TAKE NOTES?:

Yes, during the observation

DID YOU CONSULT FIELD GUIDE OR OTHER REFERENCES?:

Yes, later the same day

WHAT GUIDE(S) OR REFERENCE(S) DID YOU CONSULT?:

The Sibley Guide to Birds - 2000  
National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America - 3rd edition

DESCRIPTION:

The bird was a tyrant flycatcher (Tyrannidae) with the distinctive sallying feeding behavior of the larger tyrannids (including all of our northern tyrannids) and an upright posture. The bird appeared larger than an empidonax flycatcher but the only birds around for direct size comparison were the abundant American Robins and this bird was smaller than those. The crown of the bird was blackish contrasting with the gray mantle. The face was as dark as the crown. There was no eyering or eyestripes and the bill was all black. The wings were dark gray with pale edging on the remiges and no obvious wingbars although the covert feathers had a pale edging similar to that of the remiges. The breast was grayish and contrasted (not sharply) with the pale yellowish of the belly and vent. The throat was white but the contrast with the breast was also diffuse. The gray on the breast was heavier at the breast sides becoming diffuse streaks towards the center. The gray color on the breast sides did not continue to the flanks. The tail appeared all dark blackish with no pale feathers or edges.

BEHAVIOR:

The bird regularly sallied at least two or three meters from an open perch and usually returned close to that perch. While perched the bird continuously dipped its tail – slow enough that the direction of tail movement could easily be discerned. On April 14 I was with the bird for about five minutes and it gave a sharp emphatic “chip” every few seconds. On April 15 the bird only vocalized a few times in the 15-20 minutes I was with it, but it was the same sharp, emphatic “chip”. It never sang while I was there. The bird was never far from water as it foraged. For a short time (one minute) it wandered into an open grassy area where it would perch on dead sage snags, but this only for a short time as it made its way from the willow-lined lakeshore to the more stagnant backwaters lined with larger deciduous trees.

HOW AND WHEN DID YOU POSITIVELY IDENTIFY THE BIRD, AND WHAT CLINCHED THE IDENTIFICATION FOR YOU?

When I first heard the chip I thought of an Eastern Phoebe but since I was in Idaho I had doubts. When I first saw the bird it was on the other side of the dense willows that line the lake shore so I only got quick views of parts of the bird. But even with those partial views I could see the tail dipping and dark head and no signs of any reddish or salmon color so my confidence level was rising. Finally the bird perched up in an emergent deciduous tree and I had an unobstructed view of the underparts – I saw the gray on the breast sides, and the pale belly (no salmon color). Combined with the sallying behavior, the tail dipping, and sharp, emphatic “chip” that I had already encountered I knew it was an Eastern Phoebe. But I was glad to get a few photos and note other plumage characteristics the following morning – and it was really nice to have 5 skilled birders there early the next morning to refind and keep watch on the bird as well as take other photos.

HOW DID YOU ELIMINATE SIMILAR SPECIES, AND WHAT WERE THEY?

Eliminating other species usually starts with the bird's own genus which is not difficult in this case. The likely Sayornis in Idaho is of course Say's Phoebe but the complete lack of any salmon color on the belly and undertail coverts, white throat, and contrastingly dark head easily

eliminate this species. Black Phoebes, also lack the white throat, and have a sharp contrast between a black chest and a pure white belly.

The Contopus flycatchers do not migrate north this early and all North American members of the genus usually show some pale on the lower mandible. The Olive-sided Flycatcher has a similar underparts pattern to the description above but the diffuse streaking on Olive-sided Flycatchers continues to the flanks and the "streaky" look of the gray is consistent from the side of the breast to the where the gray stops instead of fading to a streaky look from the solid gray of the breast sides as shown on the bird in the photos. The wood-pewees have a more uniform underparts pattern without a white throat. They also have wing bars and no contrast between head and mantle color in addition to showing pale on their lower mandibles.

Empidonax flycatchers all show strong wingbars. Most also show strong eyerings, those that do not show very strong eyerings have completely pale lower mandibles. Only one has a similar slow tail dip but the Gray Flycatcher has strong wingbars and eyering, pale lower mandible, etc.

While adult male Vermillion Flycatchers are obvious other plumages of this species are trickier. But all other plumages have uniform and clearer, sharper streaking on the breast and upper belly. They also have crowns concolor with mantle and somewhat of a supercilium.

Certain elements of Eastern Kingbird plumage are similar but Eastern Kingbird has a white tip to the tail, and shows no yellowish wash on the belly. It also migrates later, has a completely different call and no habit of tail dipping. Fork-tailed Flycatchers (with missing/broken rectrices) always show an all white breast. Western, Cassin's, and Tropical Kingbirds are far too extensively and brilliantly yellow below (this time of year) and the likely Tyrannus has white outer rectrices, pale head, etc. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, also known to wander (at other times of year) always has a pale head among many other differences.

Myiarchus flycatchers in North America all show obvious rufous on flight feathers and have completely different calls among other differences.

I can't think of many likely Non-tyrannid similarities. Mockingbirds and shrikes have obvious plumage characteristics that differ and very different behavior and calls.

#### EXPERIENCE WITH THIS SPECIES (AND SIMILAR SPECIES):

Having grown up in Pennsylvania Eastern Phoebes were one of the first birds I learned when I started birding in 1992. I birded all over the eastern United States for the next several years before moving out west. But I also spent two of the last three winters living in Florida where Eastern Phoebes are a common winter bird and I heard that "chip" note nearly every day. I have also become familiar with the two other phoebes and most North American tyrannids having lived and birded throughout California, Arizona, and New Mexico for five years.

#### GENERAL BIRDING EXPERIENCE:

14 years of birding intensively throughout North America and the world. I've also held a few seasonal bird research jobs and guided about 40 birding tours throughout the Western Hemisphere.

#### WERE PHOTO(S), VIDEO, AND/OR AUDIO OBTAINED BY YOU?:

Photo