





542-01 - 1998

Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*)
Newville, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania

January 3 - February 11, 1997

The Newville (Pa) Christmas Bird Count was held on Saturday, January 3, 1998. During the species tally that evening, a bird was reported as a Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*). The next morning Robyn and I joined several other birders at the sight along Wildwood Lane in North Newton Township, Cumberland County. The bird popped up in the grass field about 30 yards from where we were standing at about 8:50 am. I had a short look through my binoculars and thought I was seeing a pinkish-orange belly rather than the yellow that I had expected to see. I went for my spotting scope, but by the time I got on it, the bird had flown. It flew across a field and landed around the base of a microwave relay tower about 150 yards away. We watched it fly around the structures at the base of the tower for several minutes - apparently hawking insects. The bird was backlit by the bright morning sky, so all we could see was a silhouette of the bird. Each time the bird landed it pumped its tail vigorously. After a few minutes the bird flew from the tower and out of sight. In the next half of an hour we twice saw the bird briefly land on the roof of a nearby chicken house, still backlit by the sunlight, before it disappeared from sight. It was during these initial brief views that I wondered if the bird could be a Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*). I mentioned this to the other observers, but none of them agreed with my suspicions.

We left the area at 9:30 am and returned shortly before noon. Robyn and I met up with Ramsay Koury, Dan Bogar and Joan Renninger and received permission to search the farm where we had last seen the bird. We searched the farm and surrounding area for several hours without success. At around 2:30 pm we decided to give up the search. Before we did, we made one more pass along Wildwood Lane. As we passed the microwave tower, I noticed a bird on the structure at its base. We stopped the car and after viewing the bird through our spotting scope determined that the bird was indeed a Say's Phoebe.

The bird was observed through at least the 11th of February on the Ethan Weaver farm along Wildwood Lane. It was observed on numerous occasions working around the exhaust fans of the chicken house, around the microwave tower base structure and along the fence lines near the barn.

Description:

This description was written from notes made after my observations on January 4th.

Upperparts - brownish gray on back, head and nape

Underparts - light gray throat and breast. Breast blended into pinkish-orange wash on belly and undertail coverts. This color was pale and in certain light conditions and angles did appear to have a yellowish cast to it - hence the confusion of the initial identification.

Wings - slightly darker than the upperparts with 2 faint, buffy wingbars.

Tail - dark charcoal gray - slightly notched. Tail extended well beyond folded primaries giving the bird a long tailed appearance.

Bill - black

Eyes - black

Eyeline - just a hint of an eyeline slightly darker than the rest of the head

Size - the bird was seen in close proximity to Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) and was about the same size, but longer tailed.

Behavior - worked from various perches sallying out and back - at times very active. Vigorously pumped its tail after each landing.

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Vocalization - the call that I heard was a single "tew" note given while perched between sallies. It was similar in quality to the flight call of Eastern Bluebird, but just a single note without the slurring of the bluebird call.

Observations from later sightings:

Tail - as the phoebe pumped its tail, many times it also flared its tail feathers apart

Bill - the bill appeared narrow along its whole length. The length from the base to the tip of the bill was about the same as the distance between the base of the bill to the eye.

Mouth lining - on two occasions while watching the bird from a distance, I observed it open its mouth (presumably while calling, but I was too far away to hear any sound). The mouth lining was orange-yellow in color.

Vocalizations - I heard the bird call on several occasions, mostly while perched, but at least one time in flight as it passed overhead. The call was always very soft and I only heard it when I was reasonably close to the bird.

Discussion:

The identification of this bird as Western Kingbird (or any other kingbird) was ruled out by the color of the belly and undertail coverts, the long tail and the very active flycatching behavior - particularly the vigorous tail pumping which is characteristic of phoebes. Also the upperparts of kingbirds would not show as much brown as this bird. Immature or female Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) is smaller, has a whiter throat and breast and a shorter tail. Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is smaller and lacks the orangish color on the underparts. Immatures can show a faint wash of yellow, but nothing like the color of Say's Phoebe. I have observed Say's Phoebes during trips to Colorado and Arizona. I also observed the Say's Phoebe that was present in Berk's County, Pennsylvania in January of 1993. The bird was observed in excellent light through Zeiss 10x40 binoculars and a Kowa TSN-2 spotting scope.

Based on the notes in the Annotated list of the Birds of Pennsylvania and a review of the "Birds of Note" columns in the journal Pennsylvania Birds, this is about the 10th record of Say's Phoebe in Pennsylvania and the first record for Cumberland County. Six of the previous 9 records for the state have occurred during December or early January.

References:

Farrand, J., Jr. 1983. *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY.

Hass, F. C. and B. M. Haas. Editors. 1990 - 1997. *Pennsylvania Birds*. Narvon, PA.

National Geographic Society. 1987. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 2nd ed. Nation Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

Peterson, R. T. 1990. *A Field Guide to Western Birds*, 3rd ed. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA.

Santner, S. J., D. W. Brauning, G. Schwalbe and P. W. Schwalbe. 1992. *Annotated list of the Birds of Pennsylvania*. Pennsylvania Biological Survey.

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Say's Phoebe
Sayornis saya

542-01-1998

Date: 9 January, 1998

Location, Weaver Farm, Newville, Cumberland Co., PA. Present at this location about one week.

Description:

Size: About the size of an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) but slimmer and with a longer tail.

Upperparts: Head dark brown especially the forehead, throat grayish white. Back light gray-brown. Wings brown with two pale gray to buff wingbars (median and greater coverts).

Underparts: Breast grayish-brown, Belly, flanks and undertail coverts pinkish-brown. Tail black above and below.

Bill: Black

Eyes: Black

Voice: A soft "purrwe" down-shurred - given several times in flight.

Behavior: Flycatching from low shrubs, cornstalks, fence posts, fence wire and the ground. Occasional tail-pumping.

Age: Probably immature from color of buffy wingbars.

Elimination of Similar species: Eastern Phoebe eliminated by prescence of pinkish-brown underparts, grayish-brown upperparts and voice and Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) eliminated by lack of yellow on belly, prescence of pinkish-brown underparts and voice.

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cc: Files
PORC
George Hall - Field Notes Regional Editor
Deuane Hoffman - PA Birds County Compiler

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round One

Species: Say's Phoebe (Sayornis saya)

Date of Sighting: 3 January 1998 to 10 April 1998

Location: NEWVILLE

County: CUMBERLAND

Observer(s): Don Henise, Robyn Henise, Ramsay Koury, Nick Pulcinella

Date of Submission: 1998

Submitted by: Don Henise, Nick Pulcinella

WRITTEN DESCRIPTION YES PHOTO YES SPECIMEN NO RECORDING NO

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. Couchman	X							
T. Floyd								X
P. Hess	X							
R. Ickes	X							
J. McWilliams	X							
B. Reid			X					
P. Rodewald	X							
TOTALS	5		1					1
DECISION	X							

Comments: 6/0/1

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 1/14/01