

FIRST REPORT OF INTENTIONAL SEED-EATING BY BLACK PHOEBES

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The Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) occurs year-round through most of its range in California and commonly breeds from March through June. Typically, it feeds almost exclusively on insects (Wolf 1997). Beal (1912) examined the stomach contents of 333 phoebes and reported 99.39% animal matter; vegetative matter was so rare that he speculated that Black Phoebes may never take vegetable food intentionally. While this may generally be true, I describe here repeated observations of Black Phoebes intentionally consuming seeds from a backyard bird feeder near Sacramento, California (Figure 1).

The feeder hangs from a 2-m pole in my back garden, which abuts a large protected natural area dominated by scattered oak (*Quercus* spp.) and buckeye (*Aesculus californica*) woodlands. The feeder is box-shaped (approximately 13 cm × 13 cm × 20 cm), with recessed feeding ports along the bottom of each of the four sides (Figure 1). Given that design, a seed can be seen in a bird's bill clearly only if the bird is fortuitously positioned at one of the visible ports. The feeder is provisioned with a commercially purchased mix of sunflower kernels, peanuts, sunflower and safflower seeds, pistachios, hulled pumpkin seeds, and very small amounts of dried raisins and cranberries.

I first noted a Black Phoebe at my bird feeder in late April 2022, as it flew off with what appeared to be a small seed in its bill. After several similar incidents over the next two weeks, I consulted Wolf (1997) and realized that this seed-eating was previously unreported for the Black Phoebe. I then began to more closely observe and record the details of phoebe feeder visits over the next 16 months.

From May 2022 through July 2023, I saw one or more Black Phoebes visit the feeder 45 times, and definitively saw them eating or carrying away seeds on 24 of



FIGURE 1. Adult Black Phoebe selecting a seed from the feeder.



FIGURE 2. Black Phoebe behaving aggressively toward a House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) at the feeder.

those visits. These opportunistic observations occurred when I happened to be looking out at the feeder, rather than during a structured observation regime. I saw phoebes visit the feeder from February through August, though most commonly March through July. Visits were noted from 06:24 through 19:10, primarily in the morning when I was most commonly near the feeder.

During a typical feeder visit, a single adult Black Phoebe flew in and perched on the top of the feeder hook or a nearby wire, then flew to and reached into one of the feeder ports (Figure 2). During the 24 visits whose outcome I could clearly see, the phoebe selected one to six seeds and then either ate them at or near the feeder ($n = 18$), or carried them away ($n = 6$). I did not see phoebes select any of the cranberry or raisin within the mix.

After almost all visits, whether seed-carrying could be seen or not, the phoebe flew off to the east. This is relevant because, in both years, Black Phoebes nested under a neighbor's house eaves approximately 80 m east of the feeder. It may be that the phoebe was carrying away seeds to feed the nestlings. This possibility is supported by two observations on 10 May 2022, when an adult phoebe took seeds from the feeder and fed them to a recently fledged phoebe perched nearby.

Twice I saw two different adult phoebes present at and using the feeder. Once, an adult flew to the feeder immediately after another departed to the east. In the second instance, one adult flew at and chased away another that had already perched on the feeder, then took a seed. In addition to these two cases of intraspecific aggression, I saw five instances where a phoebe chased or made aggressive displays toward Lesser Goldfinches (*Spinus psaltria*) and House Finches (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) that were at the feeder (Figure 2).

Flycatchers can be opportunistic feeders with diverse diets that shift with changes in seasonal and local food abundance, or during different parts of their annual cycle.

NOTES

Skutch (1997) described fruit and berry eating among an array of flycatchers, and noted that small lizards, frogs, and snakes are eaten by some species. Andrews et al. (1996) even reported fish eating by a Black Phoebe and Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*). However, the nature and extent of seed-eating I observed has not been previously reported for the Black (Wolf 1997), Say's (*Sayornis saya*; Schukman and Wolf 2019) or Eastern (*Sayornis phoebe*; Weeks 2011) phoebes. Given the timing of most observations and the typical direction of flight away from the feeder, this repeated seed consumption may be linked to nesting and the high energy demand of the young. It is interesting to ponder how and when these particular phoebes began recognizing seeds as a food source, and whether the fledglings that were fed seeds continued feeding on seeds as adults.

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