



Black Phoebe

Coloring instructions:

White - the belly and outer tail feathers

Black - the rest of the body, including the eye, bill, legs, and inner tail feathers

Black Phoebe

Length: 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Habitat: Resident along streams

Field marks: Small bird with black on top and white on the bottom.

The Black Phoebe is a common riparian bird. You will almost always see it near water. How does its niche differ from other riparian birds?

The Black Phoebe does not feed on plants. It is a predator. But unlike most other birds that we have studied, the phoebe neither walks nor dives into the water in pursuit of its prey.

The Black Phoebe is a flycatcher, a family of birds with a distinctive way of catching food. Flycatchers sit on perches, usually with head up and tail down. When they see an insect flying within range, the bird will fly out toward it, catch it with a snap of its bill, and then usually fly back to a perch, often the same one. If you see a bird flutter out from a perch and then fly back to it, you are seeing flycatching behavior.

Each species within the family of flycatchers tends to perch in different locations within different habitats and pursue different insects. We have many species that flycatch from various trees. We have a flycatcher called the Western Kingbird that perches on fences in open country during the summer. The Black Phoebe, however, usually perches low next to streams and ponds. It catches insects that emerge from the water.

Insects are a major part of the food web of a stream or pond. Their eggs hatch in the water and the larvae grow up under water, eating algae, fallen leaves, or other creatures. Many of these larvae spend a year or more within the stream and they are a major food source for fish and water birds.

Eventually, the insects are ready to become a winged, flying adults. They emerge from the water, split their old exoskeleton, pump up their wings, and fly away over the water, often in search of a mate. Flocks of swallows pursue these insects out over the middle of the river or high into the air. The usually solitary Black Phoebe picks off these adult insects one by one as it hunts from its waterside perch.

Black Phoebe Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify a Black Phoebe. The male and female look alike.
- See it flycatch from a perch near the water. Notice that this bird almost always perches close to the ground, not on tops of trees. Notice how the phoebe usually returns to the same perch.
- See the phoebe's erect, vertical posture as it perches.
- See the phoebe wag its tail up and down as it perches.
- Hear the bill snap as it closes on an insect.
- Look along the edges of a pond or stream, especially in the spring and summer, and find the exoskeletons of emerged insects. They are usually attached to plants or rocks a few inches above the water line. The skeletons themselves are paper thin and the color of old fingernails. The back is split open; that is how the adult emerged.