

**Black Phoebe** *Sayornis nigricans*

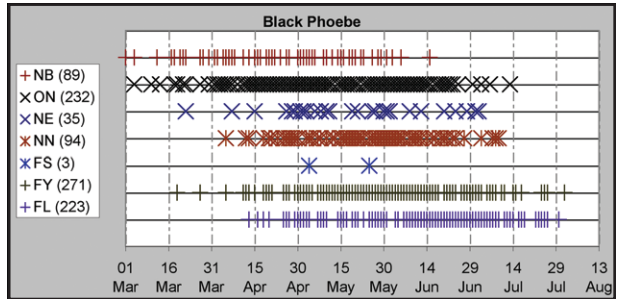
Few birds were as preadapted to urbanization as the Black Phoebe. A lawn, pond, or horse corral serves for foraging habitat, a building or bridge for a nest site, and a mud puddle for nest material. The Black Phoebe is a common year-round resident where

these elements are common. Rural ranchettes, urban parks, and reservoirs offer ideal habitat, but some birds use the expanses of single-family houses. The Black Phoebe is uncommon in wild areas where it has to content itself with its original habitat, canyons with intermittent pools and overhanging rocks.

**Breeding distribution:** At the scale of our atlas grid, the Black Phoebe is almost uniformly distributed over San Diego County's coastal slope. The high rate of nesting confirmation reflects the ease with which its nests can be found. Despite the birds' requiring mud for their nests, even ephemeral puddles suffice, allowing at least sporadic breeding in such largely waterless areas as the Jamul Mountains (T14) and Otay Mountain (V15). Buildings, bridges, and culverts now offer abundant nest sites anywhere on the coastal plain that once lacked them, and in the foothills Black Phoebes still use the rocky canyons that must have been their primitive habitat. Twenty-five to 35 in a day may be seen in the coastal regions where the population is densest, but the numbers are much lower at the higher elevations; for example, none of our observers reported more than a single family of Black Phoebes per day in the Palomar and Laguna mountains. The Black Phoebe is scarce along the east face of the mountains but nests locally along the few perennial creeks, as in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23; fledging on 4 May 1997, P. Famolaro) and Bow Willow Canyon (P26; used nest and adults feeding fledglings on 19 May 2001, L. J. Hargrove). On the floor of the Anza-Borrego Desert, breeding Black Phoebes are confined to developed oases and uncommon even there, with no reports of more than four individuals in a day.

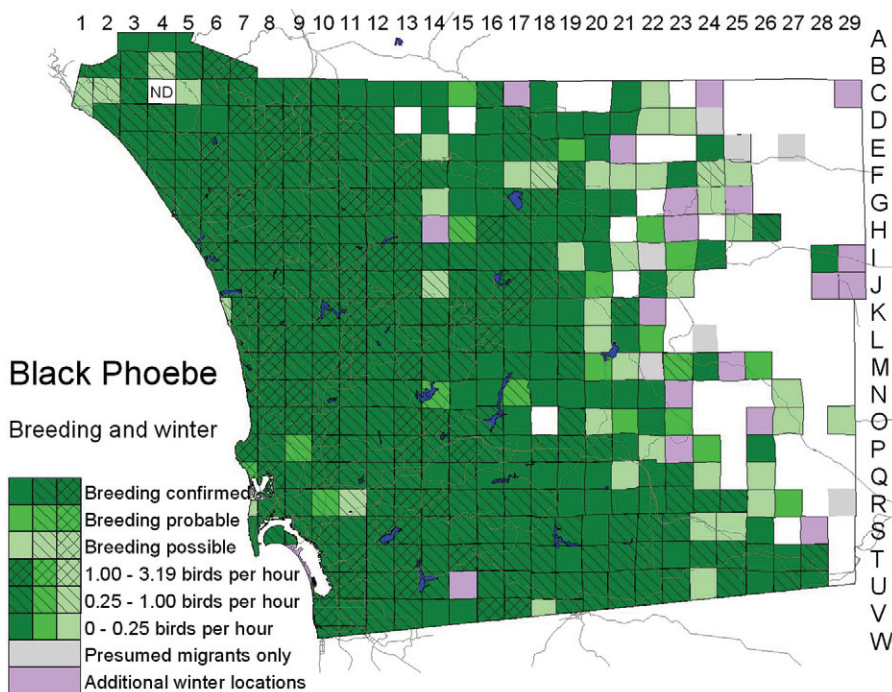


Photo by Anthony Mercieca



**Nesting:** An open half-bowl built of pellets of mud, plastered to a solid surface, sheltered from above, the Black Phoebe's nest is distinctive; only the Barn Swallow's resembles it. The phoebe's habit of building under bridges and the eaves of buildings is so well known that frequently our observers did not describe the situation of the nests they located; they simply confirmed breeding by checking out the nearest such structure when they found the birds. Nevertheless, 32 nests were described as on buildings (ranging from occupied apartment and office buildings

to abandoned shacks), 10 under bridges, six on drainage structures (including two below ground level in storm drains), one in a railroad tunnel, one on an old farm wagon, and nine on natural rock overhangs along creeks. The durability of the nests, in their protected locations, means they persist from year to year and allows the birds to refurbish them, reinforcing the rims with new mud or stacking a new nest atop an old one. The nests' durability also led to our observers' reporting many old nests, up to 16 in a day southeast of Mesa Grande (I17) 15 June 2000



(D. C. Seals). Still, nests poorly supported from below can collapse, destroying a clutch, as F. L. Unmack noted near Bankhead Springs (U27) 20 April 1997.

Unlike our more migratory flycatchers, the Black Phoebe regularly raises two broods per year (Wolf 1997). Thus it has a long breeding season, beginning in early March (nest building as early as 1 March, nest occupied as early as 4 March, and young being fed as early as 19 March) and running through July (nest with eggs as late as 2 July, young being fed as late as 1 August). The season is therefore somewhat more extended at both ends than attested by the egg-date span of 17 March–16 June from collections and Sharp (1907).

**Migration:** There is no clear evidence of Black Phoebe migration in San Diego County.

**Winter:** In spite of a diet consisting almost exclusively of insects, the Black Phoebe appears practically sedentary in San Diego County, remaining in winter even at the higher elevations—up to 5400 feet at Big Laguna Lake (O23; up to two on 18 January 1998, P. Unitt). There may be some influx from farther north in winter, as there is around the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003), or the local population may disperse only short distances, concentrating around water and insects. The only area of San Diego County where numbers are clearly higher in winter is the Borrego Valley, where daily counts range up to 36 in north Borrego Springs (F24) on 19 December 1999 (P. K. Nelson). On the coastal side, the highest count per day in winter is 64 around Lake Hodges (K10) 27 December 1998 (R. L. Barber).

**Conservation:** Importation of vast quantities of water, and the building of vast numbers of structures ideal for nest sites, have turned much of San Diego County into

Black Phoebe paradise. Though the species has long been common, its numbers along the coast continue to increase, as suggested by results of the Oceanside, Rancho Santa Fe, and San Diego Christmas bird counts. San Diego count results imply that Black Phoebe numbers in that circle roughly tripled from the 1950s and 1960s to 1997–2001. Little or no change is evident farther inland, from the Escondido, Lake Henshaw, and Anza–Borrego circles, though the terms of these counts are shorter. Thus we may infer that the increase is a response to development creating more habitat, rather than a response to climate warming or other factors. The Black Phoebe's wintering in the Anza–Borrego Desert is undoubtedly a by-product of irrigation and development, and its continuing increase as a breeding species in the Salton Sea region (Patten et al. 2003) suggests that an increase in the Borrego Valley can be expected.

**Taxonomy:** Only the subspecies *S. n. semiatra* (Vigors, 1839), distinguished by its extensively white belly and undertail coverts, occurs in or near California.