

The Status and Occurrence of Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) is a small passerine belonging to the tyrant-flycatcher family. The Black Phoebe occurs as a year-round resident throughout most of its range; however, its northern populations are partially migratory (Wahl *et al.* 2005). It is a species found throughout the year from southwestern Oregon south, through California including the Baja Peninsula (excluding the central regions of the Peninsula), east through Arizona, New Mexico, southern Colorado, west Texas, south through Mexico, Central America to Panama (excluding El Salvador) and in South America from the coastal mountains of Venezuela, through Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, to western Bolivia and northwestern Argentina (Sibley 2000, Howell and Webb 2010, Hoyo *et al.* 2006). In the past couple of decades the Black Phoebe has been slowly expanding its known range northward into northern Oregon and southern Washington where it is still considered a very rare visitor, but with records increasing every year (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). The Black Phoebe has been recorded from Idaho, Nevada, Utah, southern Oklahoma and Florida (Sibley 2000). The Black Phoebe is an accidental visitor to south-central Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013). In British Columbia this species is considered a casual visitor but Provincial records, like those of Washington State, are on the rise and the status of this species in British Columbia could change in the near future.

Identification and Similar Species

The Black Phoebe has a huge range that encompasses two continents. As a result of such an extensive range, the Black Phoebe has six commonly recognized subspecies (Hoyo *et al.* 2006). There are two subspecies of Black Phoebe that are found in South America. These two subspecies are called (*S. n. angustirostris* and *S. n. latirostris*) and are considered by some authorities to create a separate species called the “White-winged Phoebe” (Hoyo *et al.* 2006). In North America, the only subspecies of Black Phoebe that occurs is (*S. n. semiatra*) which is the subspecies that has occurred in British Columbia (Campbell 1997, Wahl *et al.* 2005). One important fact about the Black Phoebe is its preference for feeding near water (Blair 1997). This can either be a pond, river, lake, stream or slough, but this species usually will sit on a snag, perch, or rock that is near or over water to catch insects (Blair 1997). The identification of Black Phoebe is covered in all standard North American field guides. Adult Black Phoebes are easily identified by the black plumage that covers the bird from the head, breast and tail (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are also black as is the small bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The mantle, rump and wings are a slate coloured gray with light edges on the wing and tertial feathers (Sibley 2000). The lower belly through to the undertail feathers is white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the tail is black but has white outer tail feathers (Sibley 2000). The legs

are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The juvenile plumage is held very briefly during the months of April through September and is similar looking to adult plumage, but these birds have two brown wing bars and brown edges to the lower back and rump feathers (Sibley 2000). Black Phoebes constantly pump their tails up and down while perched (Sibley 2000). The song of the Black Phoebe consists of high thin whistled notes usually given as double phrases that sound like “*sisee–sitsew*”, “*sisee-sitsew*” (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species can also give a high tin whistle “*tseew*” that is heard year round (Sibley 2000). The common call note is a high clear whistled “*chip*” that often can be repeated several times (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is visually different to Eastern Phoebe and Say’s Phoebe and should not pose any identification issues for observers. Hybrids between Black Phoebe and Eastern Phoebe have been recorded in the Colorado and New Mexico, but appear to be extremely rare (Pieplow *et al.* 2008).

Occurrence and Documentation

The first record of a Black Phoebe in British Columbia was collected in south Vancouver by R. A. Cumming on November 11, 1936 (Cowan 1939, Munro and Cowan 1947). It took forty-four years for the next record to be found on April 26-27, 1980 at Stanley Park in Vancouver (Weber *et al.* 1981). There was only one record in the 1990s for British Columbia, and this was of an immature bird found at Iona Island in Richmond on July 10-11, 1997 (Bowling 1997, Davidson 1999, Plath 2000). The number of Black Phoebe records suddenly exploded in British Columbia in the late 2000’s (Please see Table 1). This species has been reported almost every other year, since 2006, with multiple records during a couple of years, and a total of thirteen records occurring over the past ten years (Please see Table 1). This recent wave of records has also coincided with an eruption of records in northern Oregon and Washington (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). This likely reflects a northern expansion of the birds range slowly north as the Black Phoebe in Washington, like British Columbia, was an extremely infrequent visitor prior to the year 2000 with there being only three Washington State records at that time (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). Like British Columbia, Washington has seen a dramatic increase in reports with twelve accepted records since the year 2000 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). It is likely only a matter of time before this species is found breeding in northern coastal Washington and possibly in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia in the future. The Black Phoebe has been recorded in the Okanagan and twice on Vancouver Island and given the explosion of records in the past decade should be watched for everywhere in the southern half of the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, Please see Table 1). The bulk of the records for British Columbia come from the latter half of April, and are likely spring overshoots with the rest of the records occurring in the summer months and the fall migration period (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, Please see Table 1 & 2). It is hard to know if birds in the fall represent post breeding dispersal of birds heading north or birds that headed further north and were discovered on their journey south.

What is clear is that the Black Phoebe can occur in British Columbia at any time of the year (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, Please see Table 1). The most recent record, the first Provincial winter observation, from December 14-15, 2013 in Chilliwack proves that observers should keep an eye open for this species at any time of year and especially if they are in the right habitat.



Figure 1 & 2: Black Phoebe at Terra Nova Richmond on September 10, 2009.
Photos © Rick Toochin.



Figure 3 & 4: Black Phoebe at Everett Crowley Park, Vancouver on May 11, 2011.
Photos © Neil Hughes.



Figure 5 & 6: Black Phoebe at Chilliwack on December 15, 2013. Photos © Dave Beeke.

Table 1: Records of Black Phoebe for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult November 11, 1936: R.A. Cumming (specimen: BCPM 6914) Vancouver (Cowan 1939, Munro and Cowan 1947)
- 2.(1) adult April 26-27, 1980: Brian M. Kautesk, mobs (BC Photo 658) Stanley Park, Vancouver (Weber *et al.* 1981, Campbell *et al.* 1997))
- 3.(1) immature July 10-11, 1997: D. Mike Price, mobs (video-taped) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Bowling 1997, Davidson 1999, Plath 2000)
- 4.(1) adult April 28, 2006: Stan Olson, mobs (photo) Trinity Western University, Langley (Cecile 2006, Toochin 2013a)
- 5.(1) adult July 4, 2006: Doug Brown : 7003 Nighthawk Road, Osoyoos (Cecile 2006, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 6.(1) immature September 7- October 17, 2009: Peter Candido, mobs (photo) Terra Nova, Richmond (Charlesworth 2010, Toochin 2013a)
 - (1) immature October 21-23, 2009: Nathan Hentze, mobs (photo) Steveston Dyke, Richmond (Charlesworth 2010, Toochin 2013a)
 - (1) immature October 26, 2009: Thor Manson, mobs (photo) Terra Nova, Richmond (Charlesworth 2010, Toochin 2013a)
- 7.(1) adult April 27-28, 2011: Rick Wright, Brian Stetch, mobs (photo) Jericho Park, Vancouver (Charlesworth 2011a, Toochin 2013a)
- 8.(1) adult May 8-9, 2011: Neil Hughes, mobs (photo) Everett Crowley Park, Vancouver (Charlesworth 2011a, Toochin 2013a)
- 9.(1) adult June 27, 2011: Kerry Finley, and other observers (photo) on the beach at the end of 3rd St. off beacon in Sidney (Charlesworth 2011b, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 10.(1) adult June 29, 2011: *fide Daniel Bryant*: Mystic Pond, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 11.(1) adult July 16, 2011: Wayne Diakow, mobs: West end of Westminster Highway in Community Garden, Richmond (Charlesworth 2011b, Toochin 2013a)
- 12.(1) immature August 8, 2011: Rick Toochin: Camp River Road near Jespersen Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2013b)
- 13.(1) immature November 8, 2011: Gord Gadsden, mobs (photo) Island 22 Regional Park, Chilliwack (Toochin 2013b, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)

- 14.(1) immature November 9, 2012: Danny Tyson: Deas Island Regional Park, Delta (Toochin 2013a)
- 15.(1) adult April 24, 2013: Adrian Dorst, Karen Ferguson: Comber's Beach, PRNP (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 16.(1) adult April 28, 2013: Rick Toochin (photo) Hougen Park, East Abbotsford (Toochin 2013b)
- 17. (1) adult December 14, 2013: Dave Beeke, mobs (photo) Kitchen Hall Road, Chilliwack (D. Beeke Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult May 28, 1978: Lewis & Doreen Jones: near UBC Botanical Garden, Vancouver (Anonymous 1978, Weber *et al.* 1981)
- 2.(1) adult June 1, 1994: RWP: Queen Elizabeth Park, Vancouver (Toochin 2013a)
- 3.(1) adult March 8, 2013: Pete Dunter: foot of 64th Street, Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2013a)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Black Phoebe records in British Columbia:

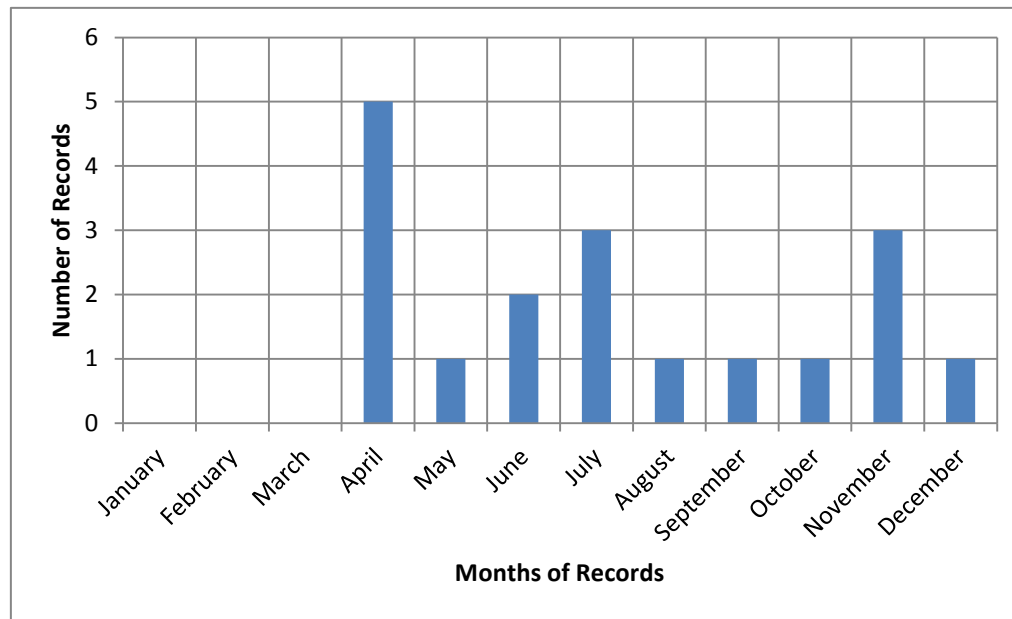


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the spring, summer and late fall of this species with April, then July and November having the highest number of records.

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