

From My Sit Spot

By Peter Harrity



This year the spring equinox occurred late on Thursday, March 22. That date marked the steady rise of the sun into the northern hemisphere and heralded the first official day of spring. With the extra daylight and the warmth it brings forth, the remarkable season of growth and life and new beginnings occurs. After the long, cold winter season, I truly look forward to the early signs of change.

One of my favorite markers of this change in seasons is the return of one of my bird neighbors, the phoebe. It is among the earliest of migrants and truly confirms to me that spring is finally here. I've seen recent reports from central New York that the phoebes are beginning to arrive. I haven't spotted one in my yard yet, but I'm on the lookout.

The Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is a small songbird belonging to the order Passeriformes (perching birds) and is a member of the Tyrant flycatcher family (Tyrannidae). Its dark head and eye contrasts with its brownish gray back and wings. The belly and chest are whitish and often the sides of the breast have an olive-gray wash. It lacks colorful plumage or a beautiful song, but the bird has a fun, energetic personality and is a wonderful addition to many backyards and homesteads. The phoebe's habit of wagging its tail and the soft "fee-bee" song make the Phoebe easy to identify.

Like most small flycatchers, phoebes have short, flattened bills used for catching insects. I often see them around bodies of water during the early part of spring because that is where they can find their insect food source. The two small ponds along the Lehigh Trail at Lime Hollow is where I find them perched low among the willows. I really feel for these brave early returnees, especially when the snow is flying, knowing they must find sparse food resources simply to survive another day.

Phoebes often nest around buildings and other man-made structures where they can be easily observed. They are relatively tame. In my yard the phoebe pair most often choose to build their moss lined nest under the overhang of an equipment shed roof. At Lime Hollow one pair nests on the motion sensor lights on the east side of the Visitor Center.

I often talk about birds because I enjoy them so much. With the drastic changes to everyone's life this spring, birds can take on an especially significant role. John Fitzpatrick, Director of Cornell's Lab of Ornithology, writes "I often talk about the power of birds, but this year they take on an even more powerful meaning. They **enliven our days, brighten the trees, serenade in our backyards and city parks, and bestow us with so much joy and hope**, all bundled together in feathers and lively personalities."



Wishing everyone a safe and healthy spring with phoebes in your yards.

For more info on Eastern Phoebes here are two great links:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Phoebe/id

<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/eastern-phoebe>

