



Eastern Phoebe in Devon: new to the Western Palearctic

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ABSTRACT An Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe* was present on Lundy Island, Devon, on 24th and 25th April 1987. It has been accepted by both the British Birds Rarities Committee and the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee as the first record of this Nearctic species for Britain & Ireland (and for the Western Palearctic).

On 25th April 1987, K. J. Mitchell, A. J. Wood and I arrived on Lundy and were told by the warden that several visitors had reported a supposed Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* the previous day. He had not seen it himself, but had some notes left by the finders that described a large, grey-brown and white warbler with a dark hood. The iris was not white.

A preliminary search of St John's Valley revealed nothing, so we proceeded to set up mist-nets in the area and in the neighbouring Millcombe valley. At 14.00 GMT, the nets were furred, and most of the group retired to rest after a tiring all-night journey. At 16.00, I entered St John's Valley and immediately saw a bird fitting the warden's description, but, even after just a few seconds, it was obviously not an Orphean Warbler; indeed, it was not a warbler at all.

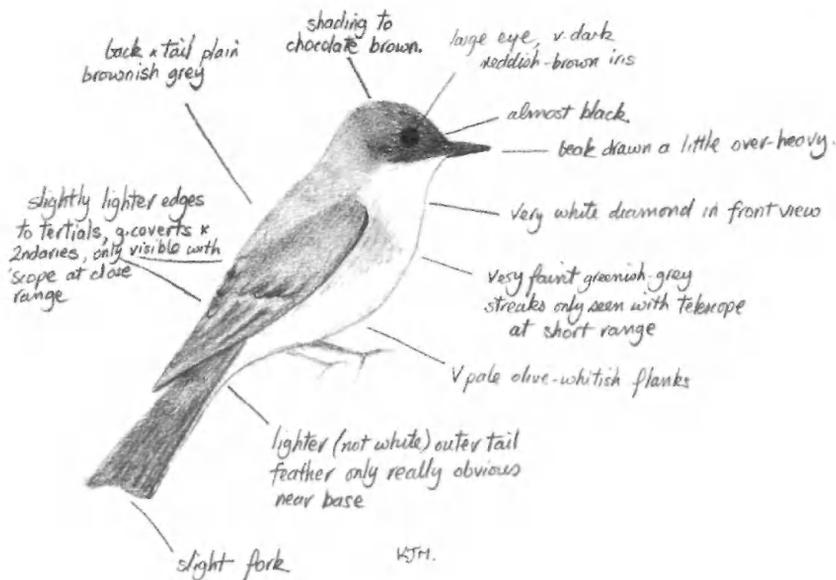


Fig. 2. Sketch based on field sketches (fig. 1) of Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe*, Lundy, Devon, 25th April 1987 (K. J. Mitchell), completed before bird was identified.

The eyes were large and very dark, tinged red/brown at close range; there was no eye-ring. The black bill looked well proportioned for the size of the head, not over-large, and with no hook at the tip. The black legs were relatively short.

This description fitted none of the British and European flycatchers, and we had to wait until we had left Lundy to check field guides to other parts of the World. Various North American guides illustrated the Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe* with the characters that we had noted. One reference also quoted a behavioural trait that we had noticed: it plunged into a small stream on a couple of occasions.

The notes made the previous day, 24th April, by J. Crook and another (unnamed) observer were detailed and included several sketches: they are exactly comparable with those that I made, even to the paler outer tail feathers ('fawn') and the changing appearance in the contrast between the hood and the mantle. Obviously, it was the Eastern Phoebe, understandably not properly identified at the time. The observers noted that the size and general pattern looked like those of Orphea Warbler (the dark eye suggesting a first-year individual), but the absence of white outer tail feathers and the persistent flycatching behaviour could not be reconciled with such an identification. JC said to his companion: 'Hey! This bird does not exist.' At first it was skulking and often lost to sight in the upper branches of trees, but then the size and behaviour—pouncing onto an insect on the ground—recalled a shrike *Lanius*. They noted 'flicking' of the tail rather than the slower 'wag' that I described. It was first seen at 06.30 GMT, found again at 09.00, and once more at 12.00, always in St John's Valley.

EDITORIAL COMMENT Rob Hume, Chairman of the BBRC, has commented that ‘The size, shape, tail-wagging and flycatching behaviour, together with the plumage details as described, left no doubt as to the identification.’

Dr David T. Parkin, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented as follows: ‘As Rob Hume reports (above), the description of this bird is sufficient to establish the identification as Eastern Phoebe and to eliminate all possible confusion species.’

‘Eastern Phoebe is widespread across eastern North America from Nova Scotia south to Georgia; it occurs west into New Mexico [see fig. 3]. It has been recorded casually as far northwest as the Yukon, and northeast to Newfoundland. It straggles to the Bahamas and Bermuda, where it is recorded in about 50% of years, and it is seen on Sable Island in most springs. Thus, it is a short-distance migrant with a limited pattern of vagrancy. It is also an early migrant, which could be moving during April: much earlier than Eastern Wood-Pewee *Contopus virens* or the *Empidonax* flycatchers, for example.’

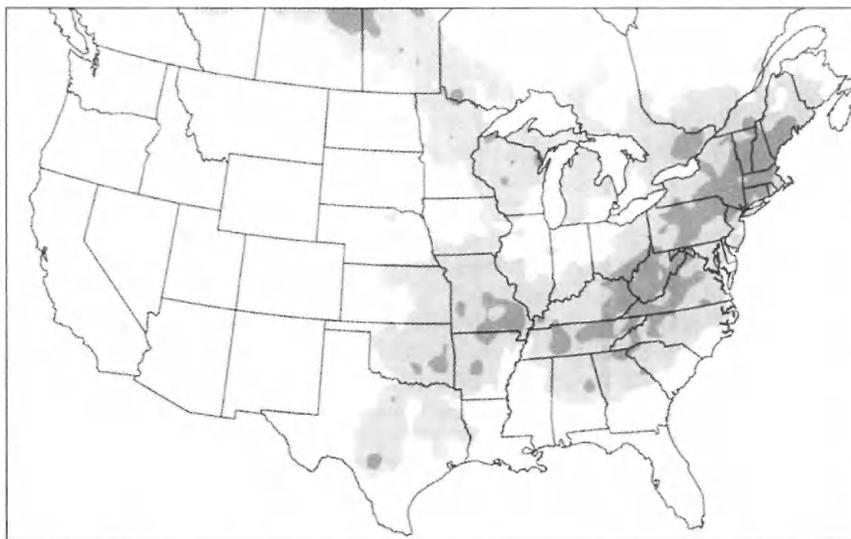


Fig. 3. Summer distribution of Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe* (reproduced by permission of Academic Press from Price, Droege & Price, 1995, *Summer Atlas of North American Birds*)

‘The record was accepted, and Eastern Phoebe was admitted to Category A of the British & Irish List (*Ibis* 135: 220).

Problems arose over another claim of Eastern Phoebe from Slapton Ley, Devon [120 km southeast of Lundy]. This bird was seen on 22nd April 1987, only two days before the one on Lundy. The two records were circulated together. From minor differences in plumage, it was clear that two individuals were involved.

‘The description of the Slapton Ley bird was, however, held to be incompatible with Eastern Phoebe by members of the BOURC and its North American consultant. This led to a delay as further opinions were sought, which supported the view that the claim was not conclusive.’

‘While it was thought by some members of the BOURC that the South Devon bird may have been an Eastern Phoebe, the ensuing debate led to a restatement of the standards acceptable in the description of a ‘first for Britain’. In particular, it was agreed that:

1. The positive features of a claimed species should be sufficiently well documented for its unequivocal identification; it is not satisfactory to admit a new species merely by elimination of alternatives.
2. All, or almost all, important diagnostic characters should be included in the description.
3. Characters that are incorrect for a species should not have been noted.

‘On all three criteria, the Slapton Ley record presented difficulties. The record was rejected by the BOURC as insufficient for a first for Britain, and the file was returned to the BBRC. On recirculation, that committee, too, agreed that it was not acceptable.

‘This leads on to a more general point about field recording and documentation of rare birds. One member of the BOURC commented that, at the recent discovery of a major rarity, he was the only observer to make notes of the bird *at the time that it was being watched*. When difficult characters such as call and behaviour are critical to an identification, it is essential that these are documented at the time. The memory can play tricks, especially after recourse to identification guides. Field notebooks may be requested by either committee. It is often obvious that these were completed after the event—and sometimes after the observer had looked at his books. Finders of rare birds do themselves no favours by their failure to make adequate notes at the time that the bird is under observation. More than one record has been rejected in recent years because of the inadequacy (or even absence) of notes made at the time.’
