

Report on a Phoebe Nest.

Cabin 3 B St.

July 1 - July 20, 1931

Ornithology 119

Louise Hawkes

Phoebe Nest Report.

During the last week in June a Phoebe was often seen in the trees between A and B Streets of Camp. It seemed to be perched in or to fly to the same tree whenever anyone came into the yard. Noticing it in the same place so often one could not help but wonder what the reason was. Finally a little before dark on July 1 the bird gave away her secret by flying from the peak of the roof of Cabin 3 into the same tree. Looking up, the nest was clearly seen placed on a few small boards nailed to the side of the cabin.

The nest being so high up I did not attempt to look into it until the next morning, when standing on a table and holding a mirror, fastened to a long stick, over the nest I could see four white eggs. The nest was made of grasses and fine twigs cemented together and fastened the boards and side of the cabin with mud. The inside lining was of finer grasses. Phoebe was very much excited at seeing anything so close to her nest but when all was quiet she soon returned to her treasures. Upon looking two days later it was found no more eggs had been laid.

For several days the bird would fly off the nest whenever there was a loud noise in the cabin or the door under her was opened, but later not until someone appeared in sight. She would not go back to the nest while anyone was in sight, so a blind was used in order to watch her actions about the nest. The first time the blind was used she seemed suspicious of it and sat most of the time in one tree and as a rule on the same branch, flitting her tail and looking about anxiously. Several times she flew to the nest, perched on the side and looked in, then flew back to her perch. She continued this for nearly an hour then went on the nest as if satisfied that nothing harmful was going to result from the blind. Two days later when observed again it was only twenty minutes before she returned to her duty and by the end of the incubation period she would go back to the nest soon after I was in the blind.

When perching in the tree the bird often flew into the air to catch a passing insect, then back to the tree to eat it. When finished she would scratch her bill on the branch a few times and then sit ready to fly after the next passerby.

The sexes of the Phoebe are alike so I could not be positive but thought it was the female doing the incubating. Only one bird was seen about the nest at a time, the other not even coming to bring food to the one on the nest. It was not until the birds were hatched that both birds were seen about the nest together.

When on the nest the bird usually faced to the north but occasionally to the south. This may have been because of the position of the nest. When facing south the bird's head was almost touching the roof but not so when facing north. In flying off the nest she flew to the west except when someone approached from that direction. She was never seen to fly up and over the house but went in the direction of the tree. In returning to the nest she invariably flew to her favorite perch just before going to the nest. Only a few times was she observed to go the nest from any other direction.

Wednesday morning, July 15, two birds had hatched. In the afternoon a ladder was placed below the nest so the bird's growth

could be washed. This act greatly excited the parent bird and she flew about excitedly from tree to tree. One of the baby birds was taken from the nest, marked, weighed and measured and then returned.

Upon getting into the blind it was interesting to watch the parent's reaction to the situation. She had been flying about apparently in great distress, but soon after every one was out of sight she returned to the nest, not in her usual calm manner but rather shyly. On her first trip to the nest she perched on the edge of the nest, glanced in harridly to see that her babies were all there, then stood looking down at the ladder as if wondering what it was all about. She remained by the nest for some time first eyeing the birds and then the ladder below her. After sometime she sat on the nest. She no longer remained on the nest for as long stretches as before the birds hatched.

No more eggs had hatched Wednesday evening although one was pipped and had hatched early Thursday morning. There was no trace left of the egg shell after any of the birds hatched. This egg had been weighed Wednesday night and was 27 grains while the newly hatched bird weighed 25 grains. In the first 12 hours the bird gained 8 grains. The one I kept the growth record for weighed 44 grains the first time so it undoubtedly had been hatched the day before it was first weighed. The fourth egg did not hatch but remained in the nest to the end.

The one-day-old bird had a little down on the head and feather tracts of the upper part of the body and some on the sides of the breasts. The rest of the body was entirely naked. The bill was wide and the neck very long, causing the head to flop around aimlessly. The young bird did not seem to care if its head was under the body or not, but when on his back it would struggle to turn over. The eyes were closed and remained so till the end of the observations. The toes closed and the foot was withdrawn when touched even slightly. The bird opened his mouth several times while it was out of the nest the first day, but did not so respond to any special noise or stimulus.

Saturday night the bird showed the beginning of feathers, dark under the skin showing in the feather tracts on either side of the breasts, on the head and back. The wings were very dark and the primary feathers just out.

The nest was about 12 feet from the ground and under the roof so one could not see into it unbeknown to the bird. It was therefore decided to try moving the nest to a place more conveniently located for observation. A box was nailed the side of the cabin 6 feet from the ground and to the right of the original nest. After half an hour of watching the birds feeding the young every two or three minutes, I moved the nest into the box at 9:30 Saturday and then returned to the blind to watch the results.

At first the adult birds came to the old nesting place with food, looked for the birds but not finding them ate the food and flew off, only to return again in a few minutes with more food and repeated the actions. Both birds continued this way for about twenty minutes and then for the next half hour they came more often, one being in sight most all the time, and seeming very anxious because they did not find their babies. They did not always bring food with them on these trips. Several times the birds were both

at the nesting place at the same time or one on the roof near it. The intervals between trips increases until by 11 o'clock it would be five or six minutes before one could be seen.

I was afraid the young birds would be getting very hungry by now, not having had anything for nearly two hours, so moved the nest to the top of the box where the birds could look down into it from the old nesting place. I then watched until dinner time and the young remained unfed for over two and one-half hours.. However soon after dinner the birds were being feed, but I had missed witnessing the first trip to the new nesting site.

About 3 o'clock in the afternoon I watched the feeding on top of the box for a time and then moved the nest back into the box so it would be protected before night came. It was then that I had an opportunity to observe until the nest was again discovered. One bird came to the top of the box with food and seemed much surprised to find the nest and birds were not there. Back she flew to the perching branch and in a few seconds to the original nesting site but nothing was there either. Another attempt was made to find her babies on the top of the box. Even with her mouth full of food she gave a little chirp, calling for them and there was a faint answer from within the box which the parent certainly heard. The Phoebe looked first to one side and then to the other but she could not see where the little birds were. Another call and another faint answer and she flew out about a foot from the box and back quickly into the box.. Her treasures were again found and soon both parents were feeding the birds as gayly as they had been in the morning before the nest was moved.

During those few days when the bird was being weighed and measured it grew at great speed. It weighed 44 grains on Wednesday the first day it was weighed and gained 11 grains in the next 17 hours, including over night and 22 grains during 12 hours of day feeding on Thursday. He increased in length from 42 mm. to 60 mm. in four days. The other measurements in the growth record are given in the table at the end.

I was away all day Sunday but saw nothing of the adult birds before leaving in the morning. During the day the bird was seen on the nest by another member of camp but at eight o'clock in the evening the nest seemed to be unattended and the young birds were calling as if hungry. The next morning the old birds were not seen around from 4:30 to 5:00 and I did not have an opportunity to observe after that until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. For an hour then the nest was watched and there seemed to be no indication of either parent around.

When the bird was weighed at 6:30 it had lost instead of gained during the two days, Sunday and Monday. With this loss in weight and a lack of the usual nest-sanitation on Monday, I greatly feared something had happened to the parents of that for some reason they had deserted the nest. All three young birds seemed very hungry so I got some flies and fed them. They readily held open their mouths for these as soon as a fly touched the bill. However in the morning all three birds were dead, the fourth egg unhatched in the nest and no sign of either parent around the nest at any time since.

It is not possible to ever know for sure what happened to the parents but there are a number of possibilities. One or the other of the parents may have been killed and the other unable or unwilling to care for the young alone. After the nest was moved the birds' heads touched the top of the box when she stood up on the edge of the nest. This did not seem to make any difference to her when the birds were first found in the box, but it may have annoyed her more than it appeared to.

It hardly seems probable that the moving of the nest to a new situation could have been the cause for deserting it or it would have been deserted before the nest was found, not after. Of course one will never find out for certain just what did happen. I may only say I am sorry I missed the opportunity to watch the birds grow to maturity.

Growth Record of one Phoebe.

	2:30 July 15	7:30 July 16	6:30 July 17	6:30 July 18	6:30 July 20
Weight	44 grains	77	94	102	90
Length	42 mm.	50	55	60	60
Bill	5	6	7	8-	9
Bill - Eye	7	8	9	10	10
Bill - Gape	7½	8½	10	11	12
Bill - Nostril	2½	2½	3	3½	3½
Eye diameter	2	2	2½	3	3
Extent	36	50	60	70	80
Wing, Right	9	10	11	15	17
Primary				2	3
Wing - Body	14			30	
Foot - Body	16			35	
Tarsus	8	10	12	13	14
Tarsus - Toe	14	16	19	22	23
Foot	6	6	7	9	9
Right 1st toe	4			6	
" 1st nail	1			2	
" 2nd toe	3½			5	
" 2nd nail	½			1½	
" 3rd toe	4			7	
" 3rd nail	¾			1½	
" 4th toe	3			5	
" 4th nail	½			1½	