

## Madera Canyon Species Spotlight:

### Say's Phoebe

If you have spent time around Proctor Parking Area, undoubtedly you've seen or heard Say's Phoebe. Present year-round, pairs of these elegant flycatchers have used Proctor as home base for as long as I can recall. Calling from prominent perches, sallying acrobatically for flying insects or nurturing yet another brood of nestlings, these birds head the canyon "meet and greet committee." Though other canyon birds are more colorful or exotic, none is a more reliable, observable wild ambassador species for introducing visitors to the nature of Madera Canyon.

Say's Phoebe, *Sayornis saya*, is a member of the large family of Tyrant Flycatchers. Generally a highly migratory species ranging from southern Mexico to Alaska, in the mild climate of southeast Arizona individuals may remain local year-round, becoming resident. Preferring dry, open to semi-open terrain of prairies and ranchlands, the Semi-desert Grassland with scattered mesquite and shrubs surrounding Proctor fills their niche requirements perfectly.

Slender, medium-sized birds, about 7½" long, Say's Phoebe is distinctively colored in subtle hues. Like many other flycatcher species, males and females appear alike. The head, back and wings are light brownish-gray. The throat, breast and wing-bars are very pale gray; belly and undertail coverts pale rufous. The distinctive tail is black, as are the bill and feet. When spread during flight, the remiges (primary, secondary and tertial flight feathers) of the wings appear pale and translucent.

Exhibiting classic flycatcher behavior, Say's Phoebe perches upright at the tops of small trees, bushes and posts, darting suddenly into the air in pursuit of flying insects. They are energetic, graceful fliers that swoop, twist and flare agilely to chase down erratically-flying prey. Primarily insect-eaters, Say's Phoebe has been observed foraging on other foods, like berries, when insects are scarce or unavailable.

Nesting Say's Phoebe weave dense cup-shaped nests of grass and animal fur on elevated dry, sheltered ledges, often on buildings. At Proctor, the phoebes sometime nest up under the eaves on the north side of the Education Shed; one nest there was destroyed in the Proctor Fire of 2008. Nests have also been built on the support beams beneath the Proctor Ramada roof, but high winds sometimes blow these nests to the ground. One spring, the resident pair built a nest on the seemingly precarious narrow metal beam right above the women's restroom door! Despite bathroom traffic and a slew of birders, the tolerant and resilient adults hatched three chicks. All three successfully fledged the last week of April and could be seen following their parents, begging for food.

Upon getting out of the car when visiting Proctor, take a minute to listen for the clear, plaintive call- a mellow *tuee*. Chances are that a Say's Phoebe will be calling from atop a Velvet Mesquite or Condalia bush near the west end of the parking lot.



Say's Phoebe chicks in nest above restroom door at Proctor