

The Journal of Caribbean Ornithology

RESEARCH NOTE

Vol. 29:18–20. 2016

The status of the Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) in Cuba

Kenneth G.D. Burrell Lillian A. Knopf



Photo: Mike V.A. Burrell

The status of the Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) in Cuba

Kenneth G.D. Burrell¹ and Lillian A. Knopf²

Abstract The Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is a common migrant that breeds in Canada and the USA and winters throughout the southeastern USA and northern Mexico. Apart from the Bahamas, few records for this species exist in the Caribbean region. Currently, a total of eight records are known from Cuba, occurring principally during late fall, after the passage of strong cold fronts, during severe winters throughout the species' core wintering range, or both.

Keywords Cuba, Eastern Phoebe, *Sayornis phoebe*

Resumen Estatus de *Sayornis phoebe* en Cuba—*Sayornis phoebe* es un migrante común que nidifica en Canadá y Estados Unidos e inverna a lo largo del sudeste de los Estados Unidos y el norte de México. Aparte de en las Bahamas, existen pocos registros de esta especie en la región del Caribe. Actualmente, se conocen un total de ocho registros en Cuba, principalmente a finales del otoño, luego del paso de los fuertes frentes fríos, durante los severos inviernos a todo lo largo del núcleo del rango invernal de esta especie o en ambos momentos.

Palabras clave Cuba, *Sayornis phoebe*

Résumé Le statut de la Moucherolle phébi (*Sayornis phoebe*) à Cuba—La Moucherolle phébi (*Sayornis phoebe*) est un migrant commun qui niche au Canada et aux États-Unis, et hiverne dans le sud-est des États-Unis et le nord du Mexique. Il existe peu de mentions de cette espèce dans la Caraïbe sauf aux Bahamas. Actuellement, l'espèce a été mentionnée huit fois à Cuba, principalement à la fin de l'automne après le passage de forts fronts froids ou lors d'hivers rigoureux dans les principales zones d'hivernage de l'espèce, ou au cours des deux périodes.

Mots clés Cuba, Moucherolle phébi, *Sayornis phoebe*

The Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is typically a long-distance migrant, with its breeding range occurring principally in eastern Canada and the USA, extending north and west to southern Yukon, Canada, and south and east to the southern floodplain states in the USA (e.g., North and South Carolina; Sinclair *et al.* 2003, Gobris 2010, Weeks 2011). The Eastern Phoebe's wintering range is also extensive, with birds overwintering north to the edge of the frost line (i.e., Virginia and Delaware to Arkansas; Peterjohn *et al.* 1987) and as far south as the Yucatan and Veracruz, Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995, Weeks 2011). However, most wintering individuals occur along the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the entirety of Florida (Weeks 2011).

Little is known surrounding the migration of the species; however, it is one of the earliest migrant insectivores to arrive on its breeding grounds in the spring, typically arriving in March and April (Weeks 2011). Spring passage occurs predominantly as the frost line and emergence of insects spread north (Weeks 2011).

Fall migration is relatively late, and follows the same principle as spring migration: birds move south as the frost line appears and as insect abundance declines, with peak movements occurring between mid-October and November throughout its wintering range (Weeks 2011).

Apart from the Bahamas, few records exist for Eastern Phoebe in the Caribbean region (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000, Arlott 2010, eBird 2016). We observed an individual Eastern Phoebe in Cuba on 15 and 19 February 2015 in Cayo Santa María, Sancti Spiritus. To our knowledge, this is the eighth record for Cuba (Table 1). Five observations are described in Garrido and Kirkconnell (2000), with records dating from the 19th century to 1960. Two records, both from the Parque Nacional Peninsula de Guanahacabibes, Pinar del Río, a location known for its importance to bird migration, are reported from eBird, occurring in November 2010 and 2012 (Fig. 1; Sebastiani *et al.* 2010, Good 2012). Aside from these Cuban records, there is also a single eBird record noted from the Cayman Islands on 1 and 3 October 2010 (Davey 2010).

The individual observed by the authors on 15 and 19 February 2015 displayed behavior and foraging characteristics consistent with the authors' experience of the species on its breeding grounds in Canada and the USA and was noted flycatching in a garden plot, along a narrow beach ridge > 100 m from shore.

¹Natural Resource Solutions Inc., 225 Labrador Drive, Waterloo, ON N2K 4M8, Canada; e-mail: kenneth.gd.burrell@gmail.com. Full list of author information is available at the end of the article.

Table 1. All known and documented records of Eastern Phoebe in Cuba. Records were gathered through Garrido and Kirkconnell (2000), Arlott (2010), eBird (2016), and personal communication (see Acknowledgments).

Date	Location	Observers	Source
February (19th century)	N/A ^a	J.C. Gundlach; J.C. Gundlach Collection, Instituto de Ecología y Sistemática, Gundlach-2145	Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000
14 September 1960	Tarará, Provincia de la Habana; 23°10'00"N, 82°12'00"W	J.H. Bauzá; Bauzá Collection, Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Cuba, Bauzá B-260	Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000
16 September 1960	Tarará, Provincia de la Habana; 23°10'00"N, 82°12'00"W	N/A; Instituto de Ecología y Sistemática, IES-509 ^b	Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000
28 November [unknown year]	N/A ^a	N/A	Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000
Undated	N/A ^a	N/A	Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000
7 November 2010	Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes, Pinar del Río; 21°55'04"N, 84°37'26"W	J. Sebastiani <i>et al.</i>	Sebastiani <i>et al.</i> 2010
6 November 2012 ^c	Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes, Pinar del Río; 21°49'11"N, 84°50'59"W	M. Good <i>et al.</i>	Good 2012
15 and 19 February 2015	Cayo Santa María, Sancti Spíritus; 22°39'29"N, 79°01'12"W	K. Burrell, L. Knopf	pers. obs.

^aObservations located in La Habana and Sierra de Najasa, Camagüey; specific locations not known.

^bA duplicate record is catalogued under IES-736.

^cDenotes two birds present at the same location.

The bird was noted from the same location on both observation dates and during both observations was noted to consistently perch, low to the ground, along the lee side of the vegetation, presumably because it offered a more sheltered vantage.

Based on documented records of Eastern Phoebe in Cuba, birds appear to have occurred during fall migration, after the passage of strong cold fronts associated with strong northerly



Fig. 1. Eastern Phoebe; one of two birds present on 6 November 2012 at Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes, Cuba. © Michael J. Good.

winds (e.g., November 2012), or during severe winters in the species' core wintering range (e.g., the winter of 2014–2015), when the frost line is farther south than is typical.

Whereas Eastern Phoebe appears to be an uncommon wintering bird in southern Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995), the large over-water flight (i.e., > 140 km) required by individuals to reach Cuba (either from Mexico or the USA) is likely the deciding factor in why so few records exist of this otherwise common species. It is an exceptional vagrant in Cuba (and much of the Caribbean region; Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000, Arlott 2010), but the occurrence of severe winters throughout its core wintering range or exceptional cold fronts (with strong north winds) during fall migration, or both, may provide increased opportunities for this species to reach Cuba.

Acknowledgments

We thank A. Kirkconnell, A. Kirkconnell, Jr., James W. Wiley, and M. Good for providing feedback on previous records of Eastern Phoebe in Cuba. We thank M. Good for graciously providing Fig. 1. Jason Townsend and James W. Wiley provided valuable input through review of an earlier draft.

Author Information

¹Natural Resource Solutions Inc., 225 Labrador Drive, Waterloo, ON N2K 4M8, Canada; e-mail: kenneth.gd.burrell@gmail.com;

²Department of Biology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada; e-mail: lknopf@uwaterloo.ca

Literature Cited

- Arlott, N. 2010. *Birds of the West Indies*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Davey, P. 2010. eBird checklist: ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S11686846. eBird: an Online Database of Bird Distribution and Abundance. eBird, Ithaca, NY.
- eBird. 2016. eBird: an Online Database of Bird Distribution and Abundance. eBird, Ithaca, NY. www.ebird.org.
- Garrido, O.H., and A. Kirkconnell. 2000. *Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Gobris, N.M. 2010. Eastern Phoebe. Pp. 240–241 in *The Breeding Bird Atlas of Georgia* (T.M. Schneider, G. Beaton, T.S. Keyes, and N.A. Klaus, eds.). University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.
- Good, M.J. 2012. eBird checklist: ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S12072924. eBird: an Online Database of Bird Distribution and Abundance. eBird, Ithaca, NY.
- Howell, S.N.G., and S. Webb. 1995. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Peterjohn, B.G., R.L. Hannikman, J.M. Hoffman, and E.J. Tramer. 1987. Abundance and distribution of the birds of Ohio. *Ohio Biological Survey Biological Notes* no. 19.
- Sebastiani, J., G. Markowski, and M. Henry. 2010. eBird checklist: ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S7111278. eBird: an Online Database of Bird Distribution and Abundance. eBird, Ithaca, NY.
- Sinclair, P.H., W.A. Nixon, C.D. Eckert, and N.L. Hughes (eds.). 2003. *Birds of the Yukon Territory*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
- Weeks, H.P., Jr. 2011. Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*). In *The Birds of North America Online*, no. 094 (A. Poole, ed.). Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/094.

Cite this article as:

Burrell, K.G.D., and L.A. Knopf. 2016. The status of the Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) in Cuba. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 29:18–20.
<https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2016.29.18-20>