

BLACK PHOEBE BREEDING RANGE EXPANSION INTO COLORADO

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ABSTRACT: The breeding range of the Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) has recently expanded into Colorado. Since the first state record in 1972, this species has become a regular visitor, ultimately establishing a satellite breeding population in southwest Colorado. In 1998, observers surveying while floating down the San Miguel River, Montrose County, detected 28 Black Phoebes as well as several nests. Since then, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) staff has monitored the occurrence of Black Phoebe in Colorado. By 2002, through which this paper presents information, the Colorado population of the Black Phoebe, centered along the San Miguel River, numbered probably over 30 pairs.

The Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) is a common breeding bird from coastal California and the southwestern United States (primarily Arizona, New Mexico, and west Texas) to South America (Wolf 1997). During the 20th century, this species expanded its breeding range, becoming a common breeder and, in some cases, even year-round resident in areas of southwest Oregon and the lower Colorado River Valley where it was once rare or unknown (Wolf 1997 and references therein). This expansion is supported by Breeding Bird Survey data that imply a significantly increasing trend ($p < 0.01$) of 1.8% per year for the period 1966–1994 (Wolf 1997). The phoebe's breeding range has also expanded north into the interior West with confirmed breeding in northern New Mexico (Tim Reeves pers. comm.) and southeastern Utah (Damian Fagan pers. comm.). The Black Phoebe has recently established a breeding population in Colorado, primarily along the San Miguel River, Montrose County, in the southwest part of the state (Figure 1).

HISTORY IN COLORADO

The Black Phoebe was first recorded in Colorado in 1972, when Claire and Dannette Griffiths and Donna Brezenger found this species on 13 May during the Pueblo Audubon Society's annual Spring Count Day (Ligon and Griffiths 1972, Kingery 1972a, Reddall 1973). Jerry Ligon confirmed nesting on 21 July (Ligon and Griffiths 1972). Despite three nesting attempts, the pair apparently failed to raise any fledglings (Kingery 1972b). A pair—presumably the same pair—nested at this location from 1972 to 1974, raising a fledgling in 1973 (Kingery 1973, Reddall 1974, 1975, Andrews and Righter 1992). The second state record, also from Pueblo County, involved a single bird found in April 1975 (Colorado Bird Records Committee [CBRC] files; Table 1). Another pair was found along the Animas River in Durango, La Plata County, 9 August–23 September 1977 (Fox 1978). Reports of individual birds on 18 May 1979 along the Arkansas River near Pueblo Reservoir, Pueblo County, and 16 May 1981 during the Durango

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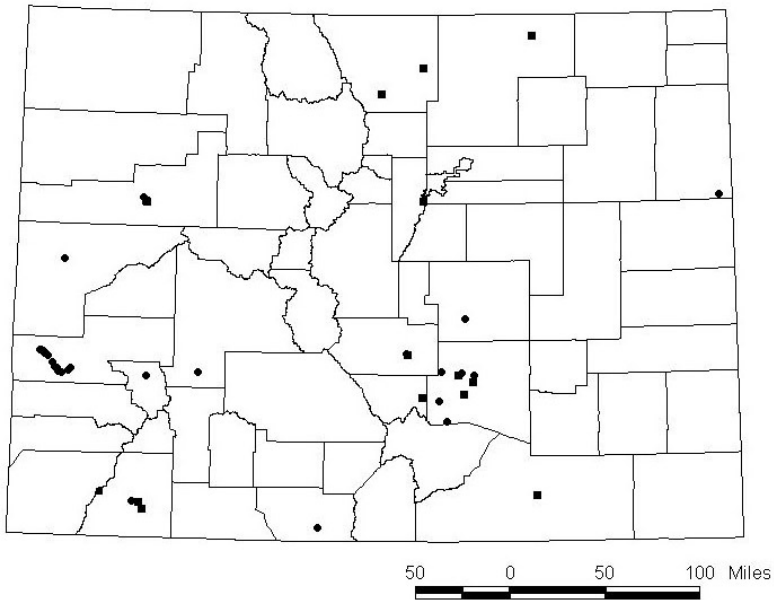


Figure 1. Substantiated records (circles) and undocumented sightings (squares) of the Black Phoebe in Colorado. Note the concentration of records in the state's southwest corner along the San Miguel River. Beginning in 2002, the Colorado Bird Records Committee no longer requests documentation for Black Phoebe sightings at known breeding locations along this river.

Spring Count went undocumented to the CBRC and, although undoubtedly correct, are not substantiated records (Kingery 1979, 1981; Table 2).

The first record accepted in the 1980s was of an individual observed at Ridgway, Ouray County, on 20 May 1985 (Janos 1985). Sightings became more regular through the late 1980s and 1990s (annually since 1994), with almost all from Pueblo County or the southwestern counties (Figure 1). An apparent invasion of Black Phoebes occurred in May 1995 with individuals seen at Fort Collins, Larimer County (6 May), Lake Estes, Larimer County (17–21 May), Pawnee National Grassland, Weld County (23–24 May), and a pair at Uravan, Montrose County (28 May). Unfortunately, documentation of these observations went unsubmitted to the CBRC (Percival 1995) although Ely (1995) reported the bird at Fort Collins, with a photo, in the *Colorado Field Ornithologists' Journal*.

Volunteers for the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed three more breeding locations during the eight years (1987–1994) of atlas work (Jones and Kingery 1998). In June 1987, Mark Yaeger and Bob Doyle discovered Colorado's second nesting site under a rocky overhang in a small cove at Pueblo Reservoir, Pueblo County (Yaeger 1987). On 23 May 1993, a group of birders found a Black Phoebe along the San Miguel River at Uravan,

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Table 1 Documented Records of the Black Phoebe in Colorado^a

First date	Last date	Location	County
13 May 1972 ^b		Burnt Mill Road	Pueblo
21 Apr 1973 ^b	6 Sep 1973	Burnt Mill Road	Pueblo
20 Apr 1974 ^b	4 July 1974	Burnt Mill Road	Pueblo
20 Apr 1975		CF & I Lakes	Pueblo
9 Aug 1977	23 Aug 1977	Durango	La Plata
20 May 1985		Ridgway	Ouray
7 Jun 1987	26 June 1987	Pueblo Reservoir	Pueblo
12 Jun 1988		Hale Ponds	Yuma
31 Mar 1991		Fountain Creek Regional Park	El Paso
26 Apr 1992	21 Jun 1992	St. Charles Canyon	Pueblo
11 May 1994		Rifle	Garfield
21 Jun 1994		Uravan bridge	Montrose
14 Oct 1995	17 Dec 1995	Canon City Riverwalk	Fremont
18 Jul 1996		Uravan	Montrose
19 Jul 1996 ^c		Rio Grande	Conejos/Costilla
24 May 1997		Lake City	Gunnison
22 Mar 1998		Uravan	Montrose
22 Mar 1998		Calamity bridge	Montrose
22 Mar 1998		Gypsum Gap	San Miguel
21 Apr 1998		Valco Ponds, Pueblo	Pueblo
6 Jul 1998		Big Gypsum Valley	San Miguel
23 Aug 1999		Terlesa Ave. near Colorado City	Pueblo
21 Aug 2001		Grand Junction	Mesa

^aAs of 2002, the Colorado Bird Records Committee stopped requesting documentation for Black Phoebes seen along the main stretch of the San Miguel River, Montrose County, on which they are known to nest.

^bThese dates represent only one record, of a pair at the same location in each year.

^cSuspected of breeding (Janos 1998).

Montrose County, and an atlas worker confirmed breeding at this location on 12 June. Black Phoebes have nested at this location annually since then. In 1993 and 1994, atlas workers visited the Uravan location several times and surveyed the 5-mile stretch of river that is closely paralleled by a road between Uravan and the confluence of the San Miguel and Dolores rivers. Atlas field workers reported only one observation on the San Miguel away from the known nest site. The third confirmed nesting attempt was in 1994 in Las Animas County along an ephemeral stream. Atlas participants discovered three more sites (two with assumed mated pairs) elsewhere in the state during the atlas period but did not confirm breeding at those locations.

THE SAN MIGUEL OUTPOST

On 12 July 1998, as part of an evaluation of low-elevation riparian habitat in western Colorado, Coen Dexter and Brenda Wright surveyed the San Miguel River between the town of Naturita and a bridge 2 miles upstream from Uravan, a distance of approximately 14 river miles. In the course of that survey, they counted 28 Black Phoebes at 12 sites, about half adults

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Table 2 Published Black Phoebe Reports in Colorado through 2001 Unsubmitted to the Colorado Bird Records Committee

Date	Location	Number	Source
2 Apr 1978	Pueblo, Pueblo Co.	1	Moulton 1979
12–14 May 1978	Pueblo, Pueblo Co.	1	Moulton 1979
18 May 1979	Pueblo Reservoir, Pueblo Co.	1	Blake 1980
16 May 1981	Durango, La Plata Co.	1	Kingery 1981
25 Apr 1989	Chatfield State Park, Jefferson/Douglas Co.	1	Martin 1989
17 May 1991	Thompson Park, La Plata Co.	1	Jones and Kingery 1998
15 Nov 1991 ^a	Boulder, Boulder Co.	1	Dexter 1992
5 May–summer 1993	Uravan, Montrose Co.	2 ad., 3 juv.	Jones and Kingery 1998
17 Jul 1994	Dolores/San Miguel rivers, Montrose Co.	1	Jones and Kingery 1998
22 Jul 1994	Loma Linda atlas block, La Plata Co.	2	Jones and Kingery 1998
summer 1994	Lambing Spring atlas block, Las Animas Co.	Nest with eggs	Jones and Kingery 1998
6 May 1995	Fort Collins, Larimer Co.	1	Ely 1995, Percival 1995
17–21 May 1995	Lake Estes, Larimer Co.	1	Percival 1995
23–24 May 1995	Pawnee National Grassland, Weld Co.	1	Percival 1995
28 May–6 Jun 1995	Uravan, Montrose Co.	2	Percival 1995, 1996a
25 Apr 1996 ^b	Uravan, Montrose Co.	2	Ely 1996a, 1997b
28 Jul 1996	Durango, La Plata Co.	1	Ely 1997a
15–23 Aug 1997	Burnt Mill Road, Pueblo Co.	1 ad., 2 juv.	Ely 1998
13 Jun 1998	S. of Uravan, Montrose Co.	2 juv.	Ely 1999
13 Jun 1998	Uravan, Montrose Co.	2 ad., 3 juv.	Ely 1999
Summer 1998	Rifle, Garfield	Nest	Leukering 2000
17 Mar 1999	Uravan, Montrose Co.	2	Leukering 1999
1 Jul 1999	San Miguel River, Montrose Co.	22	Leukering 2000
Summer 1999	Rifle, Garfield Co.	Nest/nestlings	Leukering 2000
May 2000	Rifle, Garfield Co.	1	Leukering and Wood 2000
5 May 2000	Dolores River near Slick Rock, San Miguel Co.	2	Leukering and Wood 2000
5 May 2000	Dolores River/Roc Creek, San Miguel Co.	2	Leukering and Wood 2000
8 May 2000	San Miguel River, Montrose Co.	18	Leukering and Wood 2000
8 May 2000	Dolores River/Mesa Creek, San Miguel Co.	2	Leukering and Wood 2000
4 June 2000	St. Charles Canyon, Pueblo Co.	2	Leukering and Wood 2001
19 May–summer 2000 ^c	Burnt Mill Road, Pueblo Co.	1	Leukering and Wood 2001
13 May 2001	Cañon City, Fremont Co.	1	Wood and Semo 2001a
21 May–summer 2001	Burnt Mill Road, Pueblo Co.	2	Wood and Semo 2001b

^aPublished account states that the bird “was described as eating sunflower seeds,” suggesting a misidentified Slate-colored Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), not the strictly insectivorous Black Phoebe.

^bMost likely the same pair of birds documented 18 July 1996 (see Table 1). Up to five birds were seen at this location until at least 8 September.

^cApparently paired with an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*).

and half juveniles. In addition, they observed several phoebe nests situated under overhanging ledges 3 to 6 feet above the water level. Their observations made it clear that the San Miguel River held a small population rather than an isolated pair of Black Phoebes. Their discovery piqued interest in determining the true status of this species in Colorado. Since 1999, RMBO has monitored the status of Black Phoebe throughout the state, but in particular along the San Miguel River.

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In 2000, as part of RMBO's effort, Faulkner and Levad surveyed approximately 22 miles of the San Miguel for Black Phoebes, rafting from the bridge at Piñon to the bridge at Tabeguache Creek above Uravan. They found the first phoebe approximately 5 miles below Piñon. In the course of that float survey, they counted 20 adults and 12 nests at 24 sites. On June 12, they surveyed the San Miguel from the Tabeguache Bridge to its confluence with the Dolores River and counted 10 adults and eight nests, three of which were occupied, at seven sites. Downstream on the Dolores, they found a pair of phoebes each at the bridges at Mesa and Roc creeks. Earlier, Faulkner observed a Black Phoebe along the Dolores at the Slick Rock Bridge, 20 air miles upstream from its confluence with the San Miguel. In all, the 2000 surveys detected 34 adult Black Phoebes and 22 nests at a total of 33 sites on the river.

In 2001, Dexter and Wright conducted more intensive surveys. Beginning in early March, they made observations on several occasions from selected points along the river. They noted the first Black Phoebe on 22 March. In April and May, they saw phoebes at several sites visible from the highway between Naturita and Uravan. On 13 May, they visited the Slick Rock Bridge and found two used nests upstream and sighted one adult Black Phoebe. On 27 May, they saw an adult at the Piñon Bridge, 5 miles upstream of any previous observation on the San Miguel. On 29 May and 30 May, they surveyed the San Miguel and Dolores from Naturita to the Roc Creek Bridge, floating all but the last 5 miles of this stretch of river. They located 45 nests, at least 10 of them occupied by adults or juveniles, and counted 25 adults and nine juveniles at 33 sites on the river. On a late visit (8 August) to a bridge access from a gravel mine 3 miles above Naturita, they observed an adult Black Phoebe feeding two fledglings. Several previous visits that year to this bridge had not detected any phoebes.

In 2002, low water levels prevented another season of intensive floating surveys, yet 26 individual phoebes at 16 sites were detected along the San Miguel River at sites accessible by roads. An additional 14 birds were discovered at 10 sites along the Los Pinos, Piedra, and Animas rivers in Archuleta and La Plata counties. These new sites in the southernmost counties began to fill the gap between the historical population and the San Miguel outpost.

OTHER RECORDS

Colorado's northernmost nesting record is from the Colorado River near Debeque, Garfield County, where a pair was found in 1998; this site was occupied again in 2000 and 2001. Individual Black Phoebes have been sighted in apparently suitable habitat on the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, Gunnison County (2000), and on Rifle Creek, Garfield County (2001), but investigations have not revealed evidence of nesting. There is only one reliable winter record for Colorado, of an individual along the Arkansas River in Cañon City, Fremont County. It was found in mid-October 1995 and stayed into February 1996 (Ely 1996b, Percival 1996).

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CONCLUSION

It is possible that the population on the San Miguel has existed for some time undetected. However, several factors suggest that the population is relatively new and is currently expanding: (1) the increase in number of birds between Naturita and Uravan from just 1998 to 2001, (2) the lack of observations between Uravan and the confluence of the San Miguel and Dolores rivers during atlas work in 1993 and 1994 despite intensive searching along a section of the San Miguel River that in subsequent years has hosted several nesting pairs, and (3) the recent discovery of nesting pairs at bridges, which had been checked in past years, several miles away from the center of the San Miguel River population.

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