

PHOEBE.

There were plenty of other birds building new spring homes about me, but the Phoebe occupied more of my attention than all the others. Perhaps it was because he was so retiring and had such a quiet personality. There is as much difference in birds as in people. When ^a new neighbor moves into a community, all eyes are upon him. Shall he be taken into fellowship? Will his friendship be desirable? Certainly I would expect a phoebe to be received cordially if gentility counted. But it didn't count in this case for the neighborhood had already been settled by linnets.

begin
Just over the fence was a vine that covered our neighbor's trellis. It had over-run its quarters and crawled along the telephone wire up under the eaves. One morning I saw a phoebe sitting on a rose stake. In a moment he flitted up under the eaves and sat on the wire, scanning one of the brackets. His tail was tilting in quiet excitement. He seemed to be looking for a home site, and the bracket under the eaves was the best kind of a place. But I have often been disappointed in finding the nest site I would select does not exactly suit the bird. However, I had great hopes that the phoebes would build opposite just to offset the noisy linnets.

In a few days there were two phoebes flitting back and forth from the rose stakes to the fence. Occasionally they flew up under the eaves and sat on the wire. Then I felt sure they would make their home just above the vine on the bracket. But they made no beginning of nest building although they roosted on the wire at night. They flew about uttering such

plaintive "De-ars" as if they couldn't really decide.

Phoebes don't seem to look on the bright side of things. They have a pathetic, complaining note which would catch your ear any time among the general chorus of bird notes. It doesn't seem to be a complaint, however, but just their serious way of taking life. They never seem really joyous; they are alert and light in movement but they lack the brightness of other birds,-- perhaps life is too full of business.

Day after day for more than a week the pair of phoebes inspected my neighbor's eaves; then one morning I saw a pair of linnets nosing about in the vine just below the wire where the phoebes roosted. The phoebes saw them too, and straightway decided to build a nest on the bracket, for they commenced carrying mud and straws. But they had waited too long. The linnets needed but one look for the thick vine was just suited to their needs. Then when I saw the female come with a string, I knew there was trouble in the air. But to my surprise, things did not come to a crisis till three days later.

The phoebes were just beginning the walls of their home. One of the birds was at the bracket when the red-headed linnet and his mate arrived. Without a second's pause, there was a dash of red and gray and a whirl of black and white. I heard angry shrieks and frightened cries as a couple of feathers wavered down to the grass. Of course the phoebes would

stand no show with the linnets. The phoebes were peaceable while the linnets were bold and impetuous, noisy in joy as well as in anger.

The linnets continued with their home as rapidly as possible while the phoebes sat around and watched most of the time. For several days they didn't add any to their home, yet they couldn't give up the idea of abandoning their site on the bracket. Late in the afternoon after the linnets ceased working and had gone to bed, the phoebes were always there flitting about the rose stakes and the fence. Then in the dusk they would flutter up to the wire under the eaves and go to sleep close to the usurpers' nest. I looked for the tyrants to come out and forbid the phoebes sleeping so close to them, but they didn't. It was perhaps too much trouble for them to stir out after their early bed time.

Before long, I knew the phoebes had taken up another home site, for they stayed away most of the day and only returned in the evening to roost. Then later one of them, the father I took it to be, came to roost on the wire. I watched every evening, but he always slept alone.

I became curious as to where the mother phoebe had her nest, and I watched for several days but could not see where the father went or where he came from. But one day while crossing through a small clump of trees, I saw one of the phoebes snap up a butterfly and fly over toward a deserted

cabin. No one had occupied the cabin for several years I thought, yet when I got there I found it inhabited by two families. At the back just under the shelter of the overhanging shingles, the phoebes had plastered a mud nest and now it was heaped up full and overrunning with a family of five children. Around to the front of the cabin I heard a wren singing and I rounded the corner just in time to see him pop under the shanty which was built on the side hill, ^{with} and the front part of the foundation was three feet above the ground. Getting down on my hands and knees, I crawled under and looked about the beams. On a cross-board in the corner was the nest and five eggs of the wren. With the phoebes in the rear and the ^{two} wrens lodged in the front of the cabin, there wasn't the least interference and the place was much more interesting to me than before the original owners moved out.

The back of the cabin sloped down to a height of seven feet from the ground and it was pushed ~~right~~ up against the side hill; we could stand on the slope and look right into the phoebes' nest. The mud nest was plastered on the side of the wall as an eave-swallow builds his nest. With the mud the phoebes had woven in straws, rootlets and horse-hair to keep the structure from crumbling. Then the cup was lined with soft grasses.

I was amused to see how the phoebes had built. There were five different places where they had started to build and had plastered a few wads of mud on the wall. It seems they

had selected one spot when they first started and as all the boards looked very much alike, the birds got mixed in the location when they returned each time; but they had not wasted much material for after a few trials they had the spot fixed in mind and both deposited the mud on the same board. It looked to me as if they had stood off and thrown little balls of clay against the wall, for the boards were covered about the nest with small spatters of mud. But this likely came from the birds shaking their bills and flipping the mud off while building.

Both the mother and father fed the nestlings. They often brought in large butterflies which were fed, wings and all, to the children. The father phoebe seemed the tamer of the two. A nearby fence post was his favorite perch. He would jump into the air and glide closely to the ground, a sharp click, a turn and a graceful curve back to the post. "Pee-weee Pee-we-e!" he would say as he teetered his loosely jointed tail. He seemed to talk as much with his tail as with his mouth for it was always wagging. I often wondered that it did not get tired and fall off, he bobbed it so much.

back

I loved to watch Phoebe for he had such an air of grace and ease, he was so light and quick on the wing. The highest accomplishment of a bird is its power of flight. In this it differs from the other creatures except the insects and the bat. The wing of the bird is built with the minimum of weight for the maximum of strength. The bones and the

quills are hollow, and the feathers are composed of the lightest filaments joined together by minute hooks.

over
The problem of flight seemed the simplest thing in the world to Phoebe, yet it has taxed the brains of the wisest men to explain. The solution as someone has given it, is that the bend in the wing feathers forms a hollow under the wing when it is spread. The downward motion of the wing forces the bird up. But this alone would not enable the bird to move forward. The muscles and ~~the~~ bones of the front end of the ~~wing~~ wing are strong and rigid. The back end of the wing, or the ends of the feathers are soft and flexible. The air catching under the inverted cup of the wing escapes readily from the ~~the~~ back end. This tends to lift the ends of the feathers ^{and} ~~of~~ push them forward out of the way, and the movement repeated with rapidity causes flight.

but
This seems the best explanation of the flight of birds. Yet each family of birds has a distinctive flight of its own. A good ornithologist can tell a bird by its flight, just as a person may tell his neighbor by his gait. The crow always flaps along in a slow lumbering way. The flicker opens and closes his wings in long sweeps, similiar to the wavy flight of the goldfinch, which often twitters when flying. The swallows skim along with exceeding grace and ease, while the swifts fly like bats, short and jerky in movement. A quail or pheasant flushes with rapid beating of wings, making a loud whirr. The hawks, eagles and buzzards generally soar high in

the air, gliding around in wide circles. I have never seen Phoebe fly high or far at a time. His business is to stay about near his home and he is continually watching and snapping up flies.

One evening a few days after I found Phoebe's nest in the deserted cabin, I was sitting at the window when I heard the father calling excitedly in the back yard. I went out and there he had two of the young phoebes, one on the clothes-line and one on the wood-shed. He was trying his best to tell them just what to do and how to do it. Soon he flew up to the wire under the eaves and then back again telling his children that this was the best place to sleep for it was where he always spent the night. The father had persevered to the end and won his place under the eaves for now the linnets were gone, the young had left the nest in the vine and set out for themselves. It took such an amount of coaxing and scolding for the father phoebe to get his babies up to the roost, but the three were finally cuddled together on the wire. This was the father's first choice for a home and I imagine either he or some of his family will return early next spring and take up a home on the bracket under the eaves before the linnets arrive.