

PREDATION BY A BLACK PHOEBE ON A COMMON SIDE-BLOTCHED LIZARD IN ENSENADA, BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

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ABSTRACT: On 15 December 2024 a Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) captured, killed, and consumed a Common Side-blotched Lizard (*Uta stansburiana*) at Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico, after beating it against a hard surface for 8 minutes. This is the first report of this primarily insectivorous bird eating a reptile.

The Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) is a common flycatcher that breeds during spring and summer in the southwestern United States, Middle America, and northwestern South America (Wolf 2020). It prefers habitats near water bodies or riparian corridors, including coastal cliffs, and has now adapted to urban environments (Wolf 2020). Its diet consists primarily of insects and spiders, which it hunts in open spaces, using elevated perches to catch prey in the air, on foliage, or on the ground (Wolf 2020). Nevertheless, the Black Phoebe has also been observed consuming small fish, seeds, and certain berries (Howell 1924, Oberlander 1939, Lawson 1975, Wolf 2020, Sogge 2023). While some species of the family Tyrannidae occasionally prey on small vertebrates, such as frogs and lizards (Skutch 1997), this behavior has not been previously documented in the Black Phoebe. In this note, we report the observation of a Black Phoebe preying on a Common Side-blotched Lizard (*Uta stansburiana*) (Figure 1).

Our observation occurred in the botanical garden of the Faculty of Sciences at the Autonomous University of Baja California, Ensenada, Baja California, México, on 15 December 2024 at 10:37. This garden, composed primarily of native plants from the Baja California Peninsula, plays a vital role in the appreciation and conservation of wildlife in the surrounding urban area. By providing refuge and suitable habitat, it supports both migratory and resident birds.

When first seen, this Black Phoebe was observed holding a lizard with its beak.



FIGURE 1. Black Phoebe catching a Common Side-blotched Lizard in the Botanic Garden of the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexico.

Photo by Adan Benjamin Mendoza Gastelum

NOTES



FIGURE 2. Black Phoebe striking a Common Side-blotched Lizard against a wall before consuming it.

Photos by Adan Benjamin Mendoza Gastelum

The bird then tilted its head and repeatedly struck the prey against the floor surface, alternating with small lateral hops to repeat the pattern from different positions. It repeated this behavior several times after brief pauses. Finally, after approximately 8 minutes, the bird consumed the lizard without any apparent difficulty. Subsequently, it flew to a nearby branch, where it perched for a few seconds before moving to a more distant area of the open space (Figure 2).

During the winter, when the abundance of flying insects decreases, some flycatchers (Tyrannidae) adapt their foraging strategy by exploring the ground (Wolf 2020). As a result, they encounter a variety of prey, including spiders, insects, and small vertebrates such as lizards (Wolf 2020). In this context, when consuming larger or more resistant prey, Black Phoebes repeatedly strike captured prey against a hard surface to weaken or kill it, facilitating consumption (Skutch 1997). Although this striking of larger prey has been observed before, intentional or opportunistic ingestion of small lizards by the Black Phoebe had not been documented.

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