

AP 1200  
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## THE WINTER PHOEBE

**P**hoebes have nested in our garage for the past 30 years. They choose one beam or another on which to build; some years they remodel a previous nest. Each spring the male returns anywhere from the first week in March until the last. He precedes the female by about two weeks, often buffeted by sharp winds or flurries of snow. I often wondered what he found to eat during bitter weather above deep drifts of snow, as phoebes are members of the flycatcher family, who catch insects on the wing.

This past mild winter I was surprised to see the phoebe flicking his tail into December. It was the first time he had failed to go South for the winter. What could he find to eat?

One February day I found out. The pond was frozen and the temperature low. Out on the pond the phoebe was perched on a stub that jutted through the ice. He darted out and picked something up from the ice, then alighted on another perch. He continued to feed in this unusual flycatcher manner. I assume some kind of floating insects had become frozen into the ice, and were furnishing him food. Later I read that the phoebe may eat some berries, a few kinds of seeds, and even carrion and small fish.

Each evening after sunset the phoebe flew into the garage to roost on a beam beside last year's nest; each morning just before sunrise he flew out for the day.

In early April the female joined him and built a new nest not far from the old one in the garage. By

## and the SUMMER GOLDFINCH

A glimpse of  
mystery and beauty



late April she was sitting on five white eggs.

### Heard and Seen

By July most birds have finished nesting or are caring for second broods. But the goldfinch waits until July or August for the usually single nesting. This is the time when thistles, evening primrose, chicory and wild lettuce are maturing their seeds. The seeds, while still soft, are fed to the young by regurgitation. And the fluff of thistles is ideal goldfinch nesting material. One July morning, I walked at dawn, as dew lay heavy on the grass and the air was damp with mist. Ducks flew over the pond and a late beaver was finishing the last snack of the night. A song sparrow sang; a kingbird screamed. The sun's rays struck a caterpillar who had been

asleep on a maple leaf. Fully two and a half inches long, he had a black shiny head and black feet which gripped the rib of the leaf. The rest of his body was hidden beneath a mass of yellow hair so long and thick that he looked like a miniature English sheep dog, hair over his eyes.

Close to the path a goldfinch was sitting on her nest in the crotch of a maple, just above eye level. Her mate was disturbed at my presence, and coming near me called and flitted from tree to tree, keeping well away from the nest. Meanwhile his mate talked to him in low tones. She seemed to be saying, "I see the intruder. Do your best to distract him. Meanwhile, I'll stick to my post and hope our nest won't be seen." (The male goldfinch is attentive to the incubating female and often feeds her while she sits on the eggs.)

As I stood listening to the warbling tones of the female and the louder calls of the anxious male, I heard other voices. A mother quail crossed the path far ahead, speaking to babies who answered her in a chorus of musical peeps as they followed her, single file. Then came the father, upright as a soldier, as he marched across the path, guarding his family's rear.

The sun was well up now, the mist gone. I went home to breakfast and work, feeling as though I had added a whole day to my life—a day full of mystery and beauty with tantalizing glimpses of things never known by humans, but waiting right at hand to be discovered. □ □