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Invited cleaners or unsolicited visitors: eastern phoebes use white-tailed deer to forage

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ABSTRACT

The eastern phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is an insectivorous bird that sometimes consumes ectoparasites. Previous accounts indicate that phoebes may indirectly benefit mammals by consuming parasites found in vegetation reducing the probability of tick encounters. As part of an experiment quantifying community-level vertebrate interactions relative to plant community structure, we continuously monitored vertebrate communities with camera traps in a loblolly pine forest in Mississippi (USA). We observed direct interactions between eastern phoebe and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) where phoebes perched and actively foraged for parasites on deer and captured insects flushed from vegetation by deer. Similar interactions between ungulates and birds have been reported around the globe but whether the interaction is commensalistic or mutualistic has yet to be determined.

KEY WORDS: mutualistic interactions, cleaning mutualism, commensalism, *Sayornis phoebe*, *Odocoileus virginianus*, insectivorous birds

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

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