Of the several flycatchers that occur in Arizona, few reside here throughout the year. The exception is the Say’s Phoebe, a small handsome brownish bird with contrasting shades of gray on its back, a pale rusty belly and black tail. While perched, it frequently flicks and spreads it tail. Found only in the west, it ranges in summer from Mexico north as far as central Alaska. It is a bird generally occurring in open country of grasslands, badlands, and barren foothills up to 6500 feet, and occasionally higher, where it forages on flying insects from perches of generally low vegetation. Not being restricted to riparian areas, it is widely distributed throughout the state. Before the developments of human expansion into the west Say’s Phoebes confined their nesting sites to natural rock ledges, caves and potholes. Being readily adaptable, they quickly began using a variety of manmade structures of old buildings where they construct their small nests in covered situations under suitable eaves, rafters, ledges and, on occasion, old mailboxes. Even old mine shafts and adits are sometimes utilized. The birds generally pair in February and the first of 4-5 white eggs are usually laid in early March. Following incubation of 12 days or more, the young fledge shortly after two weeks. When conditions are favorable the female may start a second nest by laying another clutch nearby before the young of the first have fledged, leaving the feeding duties to the mate. It is not unusual for a pair to triple-brood within a single nesting season. Appearing rather inconspicuous, these birds are very territorial and never appear numerous to the casual observer.

Why has mesquite been such an aggressive invader of grasslands? There appear to be many reasons. The pods are widely consumed by animals, including cattle, sheep and horses. Its seeds, like those of most leguminous (bean) plants, have a rock-hard coat. Thus, many of the seeds in pods consumed by large mammals escape mastication and pass through the digestive tract unharmed. They are then transported away from adult plants that may harbor insects that feed on mesquite seeds (for example, bruchid beetles). For germination to occur, the seed coat must be scratched or cracked so water can enter. This is often facilitated by passage through animals. Seed ingested by livestock are deposited in a moist, nutrient rich medium (dung) in areas where grasses have been grazed and fine fuel loads needed to carry fire have been reduced. Mesquite seedlings develop a taproot that can extend below the rooting zone of grasses within a month or two. This gives them access to deeper stores of soil moisture and makes them relatively immune from competition. Their roots can also harbor nitrogen-fixing microorganisms, potentially a great advantage. Furthermore, mesquite seedlings have the capacity to regenerate from dormant buds at a very early age. Even when a young plant is top-killed by drought, fire or a rabbit, it persists and quickly sprouts back. Finally, mesquite leaves are not particularly palatable so plants experience little browsing pressure. The mesquite plant has a lot going for it.

With the introduction of livestock into North America and the virtual elimination of fire from grasslands, mesquite has had many more opportunities for dispersal and establishment than prior to Anglo-European settlement. It has clearly taken advantage of them!