

MARYLAND BIRDLIFE

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BIRDS EATING ANTS

Many of our birds eat ants, and presumably they eat any and all species that they happen upon. It has interested me of late, however, to know exactly which ones the birds were taking, and I have submitted specimens from swarms that were being fed upon to Mr. M.R. Smith, of the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine in Washington. To him I owe thanks for the identifications that are included in the following paragraphs.

Flicker. In a mossy spot in a Howard Park back yard on March 4, 1945, a Flicker found a colony of ants and spent some minutes drilling into it and feeding. In his drilling he not only thrust his bill straight down into the ground, but delivered some blows at an angle, and also sometimes worked his head from side to side while holding his bill in the earth. When he had gone I found two funnel-shaped holes where he had fed; one of these was 1 5/8 inches deep and 1 3/8 inches across; the other, seven inches away, was 2 3/8 inches deep and 1 3/4 across--the largest such boring I have ever seen. The bird's prey was Prenolepis imparis, one of the honey ants.

On September 17, 1944, and March 8 and July 29, 1945, flickers were eating, at the edge of a Howard Park sidewalk and on the Hillsdale golf course, Tetramorium caespitum, a European ant that has become established along our Atlantic coast.

Red-headed Woodpecker; Robin. In June, 1945, I found on the edge of a grove in Hillsdale Park, Baltimore, a scarlet oak in the trunk of which were a number of deep ant holes. Most of the holes were in the sides of the trunk that faced outward from the grove, which were the west and southwest sides, and when in the afternoon and evening the hot sun struck there, clusters of ants from the heart of the tree would gather in and about the mouths of the burrows, and some would also run about over the bark. All castes of the insects seemed to be represented, from simple workers about three-eighths of an inch long to fearsome winged queens that measured almost an inch.

At these times both red-headed woodpeckers and robins fed upon the ants. The robins darted up from the grass to snatch them off

the trunk--once one of the gigantic queens was captured--and then carried them back to the ground to eat. The red-heads had two methods of feeding; sometimes they hitched about over the trunk and dabbed up the scurrying insects, and sometimes they clung for appreciable periods at the burrow entrances, some of which were more than a quarter-inch in diameter, and thrust in their bills to make the captures there.

Robins were seen to feed on June 28 and 29, and red-heads on June 29 and 30. The ants were carpenter ants, Camponotus herculeanus pennsylvanicus.

Catbird. A catbird was eating the common black ant Formica fusca var. subsericea on the ground beneath a clump of scrub pines near Branchville, Prince George's County, on July 26, 1944, and one ate some of the same species on a lawn in Howard Park, Baltimore, on May 30, 1946.

English Sparrow. At Branchville, Prince George's County, on July 10, 1946, an english sparrow that already had some insects in its bill caught some more at a roadside, and then put all of its catches down on the ground to rearrange them in its bill. Before it had finished doing that I flushed it and it left behind two winged females of Formica fusca var. subsericea.

Purple Grackle. An immature purple grackle on August 8, 1946, was eating winged females of Lasius niger var. neoniger on a lawn in Howard Park.

Hervey Brackbill

BIRDS IN OUR YARD THIS SUMMER

Our yard was the center of a kaleidoscopic horde of our feathered friends and, indeed we should say some enemies, from early spring all through the summer. While we amateur bird lovers made mental pictures of this changing scene we did not record dates nor the names of all the species as many times there was reasonable doubt as to the correct identification with the limited helps at hand at the critical moment.

The friendly mockingbird that fed at our "table" all through the winter continued to do so until the early part of June, this being the latest date he ever remained. His mating instinct overcame his appetite and after that we would hear his song somewhere in the neighborhood and indeed often "all through the night".

During late spring or early summer we were delighted by a visit of tufted titmice that lined up on our back yard clothes line. Warblers, of several species, flitted about in our spruce trees and even downy woodpecker made occasional visits. Aside from the common sparrow we were entertained by the song sparrows and chipping

sparrows. Chickadees and nuthatches also shared our hospitality. Also in this changing picture were mourning doves, the cuckoo, the brown thrasher, the Baltimore oriole and the purple grackle. Not to be forgotten were the screech owls who did, and still do, sound their night calls from neighboring trees. Blue jays were intruders that always started fights with mockers and the catbirds, only to retreat to some distant territory. An occasional crow flying over always caused turmoil among the smaller birds who promptly flew to the attack to chase the enemy away.

Of the numerous visitors, only four species thought well enough of our surroundings to build nests and rear their families. Among the first were a pair of chipping sparrows who selected the top of an Arbor Vitae along the southwestern border of the yard as the proper place for their nest and succeeded in rearing a family.

About the same time a pair of robins plastered their nest in a maple tree near the northwest corner of the house over a bird bath which they used very often. Their efforts too were very fruitful.

On the eastern border of the yard a family of catbirds selected a Tartarian honeysuckle bush for their nesting site. Not being satisfied with one brood they repeated the second time.

House wrens showed appreciation of human hands by adopting a wren house hung in a cherry tree in the back yard. Mr. Wren was not successful in wooing his mate to this house on his first attempt but a second effort proved successful. Unlike Mr. Brackbill's wren this pair was monogamous as far as we could ascertain. After the eggs were hatched there weren't any more industrious birds in the yard than were the wrens in providing food for their young.

In addition to the young of these species we had a family of wood thrushes frequently feeding in the back yard. Young starling were observed gathering grubs in the front yard while young cardinals fed on our half ripe grapes and some sunflower seed in the garden. Goldfinches delighted to feed on Bachelor Button seed in our garden.

One of our most interesting experiences was the result of a severe late afternoon thunder squall. In a moment of too much confidence a baby robin, with too few feathers to pass a public censor, fell, was thrown or blown from its nest in some neighboring yard. As good Samaritans we took it in and adopted it as our ward. Did you ever try to fill a bottomless pit? Well, catering to a young robin's appetite is just about as hopeless. At times it took three people to dig enough worms, gather grubs or berries to keep the fledgling happy. After three weeks it had grown a fair coat of feathers and the urge to fly made it hard to confine the bird any longer. It soon departed to neighboring yards where it would beg morsels from kind hands whenever possible. Our last report was that a neighbor's daughter caught the bird and took it to school to be an object of study and to be fed. This unfortunate robin made quite an impression on many of the children in the neighborhood and to

this day they are still asking questions about the little orphan robin.

One of the most recent thrills came in early August when a new note was detected coming from the back yard. After careful peeping the songster was identified as none other than a towhee.

Herbert P. Strack

AT THE FEEDING SHELF

Have you ever noticed the mockingbird closely at your shelf? To me, it is one of the loveliest of the birds. It flies down and alights quietly; its posture is proud and perfect. It looks and acts like a thoroughbred. Although the cardinal and blue jay far surpass it in bright plumage they lack its poise; dark plumage with white in the wings suits its aristocratic character.

Nina Brackbill

During the winter of 1942-43 I had quite a stranger at my feeding shelf - the red-bellied woodpecker. I first saw him early in December on the trunk of a tree, and then, when the cold weather came, he was a frequent visitor at my shelf, which is on my kitchen window-sill. His rather striking markings and beautiful Chinese-red head made him very easy to identify. Like my other woodpecker visitors he was very fond of suet and the presence of other birds on the tray did not disturb him in the least. Early in the Spring he began to bore a hole near the top of an oak tree which had been broken in a storm, but the meddlesome starlings drove him away and I haven't seen him since, although I thought I heard his sharp note last Spring.

Anne S. Gephart

A TRIP TO CAPE MAY, N.J.

Two cars of Club Members made the recent Fall Trip to Cape May, N.J. to observe the migration of shore birds and warblers as they journey southward. The first car left Baltimore Friday evening September 20th, in Orville Crowder's car with Ruth E. Lenderking, Florence Burner, "Billy" McHoul and Ray J. Beasley as the other occupants, arriving in Cape May about midnight.

The next morning being quite rainy, we passed up an early morning sortie. As previously arranged, we had breakfast with a group from the Washington, D.C. Audubon club, who were also participating in the trip, at their hotel. They had arrived earlier the previous evening. Showing more fortitude than we, they had arisen in time

to be afield by daylight, and we contacted them on their return. This group was under the leadership of Dr. I. R. Barnes and numbered twelve persons. After a hearty meal we joined forces and thereafter travelled as one unit.

About noon the second car arrived with Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Strack, Willard Strack, Mrs. Frank Stollenwerck, and Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Bures. With them came clearing weather.

Throughout the day the area surrounding Cape May was rather well covered in search of birds. Most of the morning was spent at the Point and the Witmer Stone Sanctuary. While observing a flock of common terns and gulls at the Point, we witnessed a duck hawk strike and carry off a small bird while in the air. Later, we watched a couple of pigeon hawks and a pair of sharpshins chasing a group of flickers. We did not see the hawk actually strike his prey but the cry of a flicker beyond view in the woods seemed to tell of a tragedy. We were rather astonished that the flickers under attack seemed to make no effort to leave the area, but persisted in flying about the immediate locality, often within a few feet of where a hawk would be temporarily perched. One passed between a pigeon hawk and a sharpshin perched only some 100 feet apart. At that season, the flickers would probably not have been restrained from fleeing the neighborhood under such circumstances because of nest or young. Why did they remain and court disaster? Possibly they felt safer in familiar territory.

While visiting the marshes and flats around Stone Harbor later in the day, we were delighted with the abundance of American and snowy egrets, and little blue herons. While trying to raise a couple of American bitterns in a marsh, we approached a nearby group of trees. Suddenly a flock of at least 130 black-crowned night herons exploded from the trees, for a moment filling the surrounding area. An investigation of an outlying shore revealed numerous black-bellied and semipalmated plovers, a Hudsonian curlew, a sizable number of semipalmated and least sandpipers, three western sandpipers, a few knots, sanderlings, and eight black-backed gulls. The prize for the day, however, was two Louisiana herons. Greater yellow-legs, ruddy turnstones and killdeers were sighted at times but not in a great profusion.

The second day was very much a repetition of the first in areas visited and birds seen except that we added a couple of marsh hawks, some long-billed marsh wrens, a clapper rail and a pied-billed grebe.

The tally of bird species listed was not as complete as we had expected, the paucity of warblers being particularly noticeable. On the whole, however, everyone was very well satisfied with the results when the party broke up in early afternoon for the return home. The distance and expected traffic made breaking up rather early advisable.

Ray J. Beasley

SEPTEMBER LOCAL FIELD TRIP

Three trips were taken on September 15, using Mr. Crowder's place on Bird River as a base. The first was along the nature trail he has carved out along the marshes. The marsh wren, whose dummy nests among the reeds are in plain view, was heard. But the high spot of this walk was the observing of at least 50 wood ducks taking flight from the sheltered marshes in groups of two to seven. Red-wing blackbirds were numerous. The second trip was along White Marsh Run on a trail leading along a wooded creek-bank into the marshes. The unexpected sight of an immature male rose-breasted grosbeak gave a real thrill. The third trip was taken late in the warm, sunny afternoon to Oliver Point along the Bay. There we saw at least 200 cowbirds, males, females, and immatures, feeding on the lawns in a great flock. Each one of these parasitic birds had been reared in the nest of some other bird, probably to the death of her own offspring, yet here they were all gathered together, ready for their southern flight. At the same place we saw and studied swallows, which perched obligingly on the wires and nearby trees while we walked almost underbeath them. In the flock of about 100 were barn swallows, rough-wings, bank and tree swallows and even two female martins.

Pearl Heaps

THE SEASON

June 16, 1946 to August 16, 1946

A variety of circumstances combined to keep many of our usual observers out of the field during the summer months so that no very representative report can be presented. However, a number of interesting observations were made making it worth while to continue this series.

The summer was chiefly remarkable for its mildness. There were none of the usual periods of oppressive heat and humidity; temperatures of over ninety never lasted more than a day or two at a time. During the first half of August there were a number of days of remarkably cool weather reminiscent of October. What effect, if any, these unusual conditions had upon birdlife is not shown by our records.

Most records have to do with nesting activities. Wood pewee: adults feeding young out of the nest, July 7 to 9, at Branchville, Prince Georges County. Bluejay: a brood of young being fed though well able to fly, June 24, at Govans, Baltimore City. Catbird, color-banded birds working for a second nest, June 21, at Howard Park, Baltimore City. Mockingbird: nest with eggs, July 12, Hanlon Park, Baltimore City. Woodthrush: nest with three eggs, July 1, young hatched, July 3, two of the young birds fluttered away from nest when it was approached, July 13, at Govans, Baltimore City. White-eyed vireo: pair feeding a young cowbird out of the nest,

June 20, near Loch Raven, Baltimore Co. Prairie Warbler: nest containing four young with eyes not yet open, June 29, near Loch Raven, Baltimore Co. Maryland yellowthroat: young out of the nest being fed, June 29, near Loch Raven, Baltimore Co. Yellow-breasted chat: young out of the nest but still not able to fly being fed, July 11, at Branchville, Prince Georges Co. Purple grackle: feeding young out of the nest, July 8, at Branchville, Prince Georges Co. Indigo bunting: female carrying nesting material, June 23, at Loch Raven, Baltimore Co. Goldfinch: pair at an apparently completed but eggless nest, July 15 near Loch Raven, Baltimore Co. Field sparrow: three young only a couple days old in a nest, June 29, near Loch Raven, Baltimore Co.

There are a few miscellaneous notes unconnected with breeding activities. On July 15 a woodcock was noted back on a well-studied area near Loch Raven from which the species had been absent since early spring. On August 1 the last color-banded female robin was seen on its territory in a Forest Park, Baltimore City, area. The last woodthrush song was heard on August 6 at Howard Park, Baltimore City. On July 29 a flock of about fifty starlings was observed about sunset at Govans, Baltimore City, flying in the manner characteristic of winter toward the center of the city.

All records above from Govans and Loch Raven were reported by Kolb; all others were by Brackbill.

Haven Kolb

ABSTRACT OF MEETINGS

August 4, 1946

An afternoon picnic meeting was held in the Glen of the State Teachers College at Towson. This meeting was devoted to informal discussion and planning for the projected meeting in early September of the Program Committee. There were 9 members and 4 visitors present.

H. K.

September 15, 1946

The September meeting of the Society was held at Mr. Crowder's place on Bird River. Some members went on Saturday and stayed over night. Some appeared early Sunday morning and took advantage of the morning field-trips. Others appeared in the afternoon and evening, 25 in all. Some even went swimming, it was so warm. After a picnic supper, an informal meeting was held in which plans for the year were discussed. Mr. Crowder then showed us some of his colored slides of the club taken during our first year, and on special request, some taken during his recent trip to the west.

P. H.

September 26, 1946

The regular meeting of the Executive Council was held as usual at the Natural History Society of Maryland. Mr. Kolb, having resigned as Recording Secretary, the Council, following the provisions of the Constitution, elected Mr. Ray J. Beasley to fill the vacancy. Mr. Crowder presented details of a plan to solicit new memberships from persons interested in birds in all parts of the State thus making our Society a truly Maryland organization. Printing of a season program and trip schedule was authorized.

R. B.

NOTES AND NEWS

We welcome to our Society the following new members who have joined us during September:

Miss Celeste Jackson, 2952 Yorkway, Baltimore (22)
Miss Edith Long, 1729 Park Ave., Baltimore (17)
Mrs. Samuel North, 3506 Newland Ave., Baltimore (18)
Mr. Benjamin S. Tongue, 3506 Newland Ave., Baltimore (18)

The annual Christmas Bird Count will be held this year on Sunday, December 22, 1946. Headquarters will be at Mr. Crowder's place on Bird River. Plans are being made to cover completely all the available types of habitat in the surrounding region. In order to do this a large number of observers will be needed so that we may divide up into several parties for the most efficient coverage. If you expect to attend this, one of the most important field days on our annual calendar, communicate at once with the Chairman of the Field Trips Committee, Miss Florence Burner, 5350 Reisterstown Road, Baltimore 15, Liberty 0797, so that we may plan the organization of the day's campaign.

A number of members have expressed the opinion that the Society should take cognizance of matters pertaining to the legal position of birds and attempt to express its attitude whenever it would seem to be advisable and helpful to do so. In line with this thought President Crowder has recently appointed Mrs. Leslie Gay to the chairmanship of a Legislation Committee.

We urgently need volunteers to help out in assembling, stapling, and mailing Maryland Birdlife. If you can be of service to our Society in this matter send your name to the Corresponding Secretary and you will be notified when your help will be needed.

H. K.