

Carolina Birds and Birders

. . . with Willie Morrison

The Petiole Munchers

Note from T.A. Beckett III, Magnolia Gardens and Nurseries, Route 4, Charleston, S.C. 29407, 12 March 1970:

"Just a quick note of an observation on the evening grosbeaks that I have not seen in print.

"On two different occasions I have had a number of grosbeaks that would obtain their fill of sunflower seed at my feeders and then, for some reason, fly into adjacent cherry laurel (*Prunus caroliniana*) and consume leaf petioles and twigs.

"I had noticed that the laurels were getting rather thin but did not suspect the cause until I was watching them after lunch and observing their activities.

"The birds would cut the petiole of a leaf off close to a twig and with a chewing motion work the petiole crosswise in the bill until it reached the leaf which was cut off and dropped. The same action was observed to take place with the small twigs, about toothpick size. The birds would cut them off and start one end into the bill, crosswise, but nothing would show up on the other side in spite of the fact that the twig might be 3 to 5 inches long.

"In spite of close observation, I have seen this occur only twice. In general, the majority of birds in a flock would participate in the action. When I examined the ground under the cherry laurels, I found that it would be covered with leaves without petioles."

Comment from WMM: When we received this note from Ted, Archie and I spent days watching the grosbeaks in the large cherry laurel about 10 feet from the feeders and 20 feet from the window. This is the favorite perching tree that they fly to when disturbed at the feeders.

Under the tree the ground was covered with brown and green leaves with no petioles, while many of the lower branches had no old leaves remaining, only the new terminal leaves, with the tight flowerbud clusters below.

For 15 minutes, Sunday morning, 15 March 1970, I watched a male grosbeak as he worked outward over three small branches, cutting the leaves from the stem, chewing the petiole and dropping the leaf. Sometimes he would leave two or three as he kept his balance and stretched to reach the tiny leaves of the terminal bud and the tight buds of the flower clusters below. During this short time of observing one bird, I counted 17 leaves fluttering downward. Reminds me of damage done by caterpillars to azaleas. If Ted hadn't told us about this I might be out looking for caterpillars!! In March???

I asked Ted to please answer one question for me. Where do the evening grosbeaks go when they leave the sunflower feeders after two to three o'clock? His answer is as follows:

"At my feeders here at Magnolia Gardens and Nurseries the grosbeaks come in great numbers early in the morning. A few birds continue feeding until about noon. At this time I again receive a large feeding flock and a few continue up to about three-thirty. Very few, if any, feed regularly at the feeders after this time in the afternoon.

"Where ever there are trees throughout the Nurseries, they can be heard but seldom seen. I have flushed them from the ground feeding on chickweed.

"Since 1958, when present, the species appears to spend considerable time in a wet gum, black and sweet gum area, bordering our sales yard. I know for sure that it was used for roosting at night before the undergrowth was cleared.

"During the past several weeks a large number of birds appear to loaf and feed on buds in some small live oaks adjacent to Magnolia Gardens at 'Ravenswood.' I consider their call note more important in locating them than sight. For instance, they often feed in willows though I seldom see them there."

Winter Finches at Mullins

Edward C. Bethea of 530 Yarboro St., Mullins, S.C., writes an interesting letter of his birdwatching activities in Mullins. He and his wife have been interested in birds for about 30 years. They have lived in Florida, North Carolina, and Maryland and have now moved back to South Carolina where the birding is the best that they have ever experienced. He recommends it very highly as a good hobby and therapy which gives genuine pleasure for the retired or shut-ins.

His letter of 4 February 1970 is typical of the reports coming to "The Chat" of the influx of Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and a few reports of Red Crossbills.

"We moved back to Mullins after retiring in Miami, Florida. We bought a home and moved into it in June 1968. Being the bird-lovers that we are, about the first thing we did was to get a bird bath and install feeders. We now have so many birds that sometimes over the back yard is a blanket of birds. There are many different kinds and we welcome them all. We are now buying all our seed in bulk, getting 100 pounds of sunflower seed and 100 pounds of scratch feed at one time, which only lasts us for two weeks, in addition to stale bread, left over rice, grits and oatmeal.

"During the winter of 1968-69 we saw the first Evening Grosbeaks. On 23 November 1968 we saw one female. By 6 December 1968 they were coming in droves and staying. About 60 of them became regulars, leaving by 4 May 1969.

"This winter we saw 6 of them arrive 18 December 1969. By 1 January 1970 the flocks had built up so much they they were coming in droves to the backyard to feed. We have counted over 100 at one time.

"During the winter of 1968-69 we had as many as two male Red Crossbills every day for about a week. We saw the first of them this winter on 1 January 1970 and later 3 males with one female. One male has remained with us for a month now, eating sunflower seed right along with the Evening Grosbeaks."

Razorbill on Edisto Beach

Roger D. Lambert, Editor of *The Lesser Squawk*, 205 Harter Drive, Summerville, S.C. 29483, reports in the February 1970 issue, Vol. XXI No. 2, that on 17 February 1970 he found an oil-soaked Razorbill on Edisto Beach. A strong onshore wind which had prevailed for some time apparently had washed it ashore. Despite efforts to save it, this northern counterpart of the penguin died within a few hours.

Peregrine Falcon in Richland County

A note from William Bunch, 5040 Radcliffe Road, Columbia, S.C. 29206, reports that on 11 November 1969 he and George C. Taylor, 6230 Westshore Road, Columbia, S.C., sighted a Peregrine Falcon. "This took place on a farm 12 miles out of the city where there is approximately 1200 acres of big fields with a few small wooded areas and swamps surrounding this land. This is in Richland County and I have heard that these falcons are very uncommon in our area."

[*South Carolina Bird Life*, page 179, gives its status as rare summer resident in the mountains, uncommon winter visitor 14 August to 9 May, and in the remaining sections, most frequent along the coast where the Duck Hawk shows preference for the barrier islands and salt marshes.-WMM]

Hampton Bird Notes

Adding color to the dead-of-winter scene in our part of the Lowcountry were many more Baltimore Orioles than usual, staying over from fall to spring. One neighbor-friend reported in January, 10 pairs of them sighted at once at her patio feeders! Also here in great numbers from early winter until early March were American Goldfinches and Purple Finches.

There were fewer Robins than usual in the Hampton area, and fewer Evening Grosbeaks than last year. Only a couple of large flights of migrating Cedar Waxwings were sighted in town this year, also a decrease over previous years.

Many flickers headquarter in our yard, mostly, I suspect, because of a 75-foot sycamore tree back of our house. (They have often raised families in holes in the trunk high up in this tree). One day last November I watched a ceremonial dance between two flickers who had been scratching about in the pine mulch of an azalea bed. They were digging and picking for food when suddenly they faced each other, pranced back and forth in a ritualistic sort of dance-step, reminiscent of some of the routines on the modern dance floor. They were gyrating mostly from the neck up, stretching and moving back and forth in duck-fashion, while the rest of the body was held stiff. It was odd to watch!-MARTHA BEE ANDERSON, Hampton, S.C.

White Pelicans in Charleston Area

The Lesser Squawk reported in the November 1969 issue that James M. Dorn Jr., on 22 October 1969, saw four White Pelicans on North Edisto Sound. Although no other observer was present, he is quite certain of their identity. He writes: "These birds are much larger than the brown pelicans (saw them together) and their entire body is white-black on the wings when in flight. The beak pouch is huge and yellow. They feed right in the water by scouping, not diving as do the Brown Pelicans. I watched these birds for about an hour because I had never seen them before. I took some pictures which I hope will turn out."

The News and Courier, Sunday 30 November 1969 has a write-up by their Outdoors Writer, Farley Smith, telling of a White Pelican that has been staying on a fresh water pond on Julian Sidi Limehouse III of Mullet Hall Plantation on John's Island for several weeks. It doesn't seem to be bothered by visitors. If approached too closely it will fly to the Kiawah River but return within a few minutes.

Bluebird Trail at Pleasant Garden

A letter from Mrs. Harold Marriott Draper Jr., tells an interesting story of how they have increased the Eastern Bluebird population on their farm at Pleasant Garden, N.C.

"We moved from Greensboro to our farm in Pleasant Garden in September 1968 where we have a wonderful assortment of birds to enjoy and study. We counted over 53 species last year during spring and summer, (including our winter visitors still around in the spring, such as the White-throated Sparrow), and there are probably many that we missed in our wooded areas. We are starting a new tabulation with January of this year.

"You might like to know of our Bluebird Trail and its status. We started out with 8 boxes early in 1967. Each year we have added to these until we now have 20 boxes placed around our approximate 130 acre farm.

"Each year we are noting an increase in number of young hatched and raised-a real thrill. The most young are counted during the first nesting, or April-May in our area. In 1967 bluebirds were increased by 22 babies, in 1968 23 birds were hatched, and in 1969 there were 35 offspring.

"In 1969 bluebirds built and raised young twice in martin gourds suspended 15 feet in the air. We feel quite fortunate having bluebirds in our yard year-round, even in the coldest weather. With our population increase, we are urging everyone around us to erect

boxes as we will very soon have many prospective parents looking for suitable nesting sites, as they will only use a few of our boxes.

"One interesting nest combination was observed in a walnut tree below our house. A Wood Thrush built high in the tree and directly above this nest a Summer Tanager built its nest. So we watched both sets of parents feed babies at the same time and then take them off the nest the same afternoon."

Welcome, Wanderer

A little brown bird with red markings
Came to my house one day.
He came with a big flight of finches,
But he hadn't their 'I know this place' way.

He was rather shy and retiring
And flew at the slightest alarm,
While his much more colorful cousins
Sat placidly; fearing no harm.

Having known that in both Carolinas
For some winters past he'd been seen,
As each spring progressed, and the purples flew North,
He was something that just 'might have been'.

So; during those years I had sought him,
Having watched quite diligently,
When on that chilly day he at last came my way,
A fond dream became reality!

What a charming surprise, that first visit;
Tho I saw him daily since then,
How I watched with a wish that was fin'ly fulfilled
When he came with a little brown hen!

And once in a while there were more than the pair,
On one snowy day there were six!
Four wearing red, the other two plain,
Bet you know how that memory sticks!

In a short while they'd lost all their shyness
Seemed to fit right into the plan,
These few little strangers who cracked sunflower seed.
House Finches had come to Rowan.

One morning in late March I missed them,
Now; while I've not seen them since then
I hope; having fed at my feeders,
Next season they'll visit again.

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