

# Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Backyard Birder, what's happening in *your* back yard? Let us hear from *you!* In case you are a bit hesitant about sharing observations with us, we have here some examples. Time, date, and place are nice, but not necessary.

## How to Bathe a Hummingbird

On 3 May 1980 I was using a garden hose to mist some house plants recently moved outdoors for the summer when a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird darted into the spray. She hovered briefly and flew to a nearby limb to preen. She returned to the spray repeatedly, once passing within 5 feet of me, and perched as close as 8 feet away. During the many years that I have kept data on water-bathing in wild birds, I have seen hummingbirds fly through the spray of my water sprinkler many times. This, however, is the first time I have ever seen a hummingbird or any other kind of wild bird bathe at a hand-held hose.—ELOISE F. POTTER, Route 3, Box 114 AA, Zebulon, N.C. 27597

## I Heard a Hummingbird Sing!

At approximately 0910 on 16 October 1974, I watched an immature Ruby-throated Hummingbird light on my clothesline within 18 feet of where I was standing. It sat perhaps a minute or more, fluffing out body feathers, shaking wings, and singing! The song was high, thin, and barely audible. It was two or three notes in a warble, similar to the song of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, but softer. It was definitely musical. The bird turned its head from side to side while singing and I could see the throat move and the bill open. I was observing with binoculars. I have often heard the metallic call note of hummers feeding and a loud squeaking when chasing or attacking another bird. This "song" had none of that metallic or squeaky quality. I could find no reference to an actual song for the Ruby-throated Hummingbird in Bent.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607

## And Speaking of Hummingbirds ...

Do you know the Portuguese word for hummingbird? It is *beija-flor*, pronounced *bāy' jā-flōr'*, with a very soft *j* and the *r* rolled off the back of the tongue. The English translation is "kisses-flower." This delightfully appropriate name was given to me by my neighbor Gladys Baker, whose nephew Willis Reid is a U.S. Army parasitologist stationed in Brazil. He and his lovely wife Jan, also a professional biologist, write fascinating letters about life in their new home, particularly about the birds and flowers. Their young sons speak casually of toucans and such, but they become excited when they see our native songbirds during visits to North Carolina.—EFP

## Molting and Associated Grooming

Backyard birding in the summertime can become pretty humdrum. Fewer species are to be found in any one yard during the nesting season than at other times of the year. The weather is hot and humid, and it is not pleasant to spend long hours outside. As summer wears on most adult birds are molting and are a ragged, motley looking crew. Baby birds and fledglings keep up a constant din begging to be fed. Nothing much worth looking at, right? Wrong! There is much drama in the bird world in summer—comedy and tragedy, success and failure. But something is going on all the time.

Molting birds may look unattractive, but they can be most interesting to watch. The many aspects of grooming are fascinating. We are, perhaps, more familiar with water-bathing than any other grooming activity. There are also sunbathing, dusting, and anting. It would appear that birds are most uncomfortable during the molt period. In addition to the heat and humidity, there seems to be skin irritation that may be somewhat alleviated by hot sunshine, dust, water, and ants. The old birds are tired from the hard work of feeding young. When the last brood is on its own, they retire to the shadows to spend much time in resting and grooming. They seldom sing during this period. Tempers are short as pairs split up and young birds are sent on their way. The postnuptial molt begins during the breeding season for some birds that nest more than one time, and it may stretch from late spring into early fall.

The first time one sees a bird sunbathing, it is a fearsome sight. The adult bird (and young, too, during postjuvenile molt) may lie on the ground with wings and tail outspread, head facing the sky, beak open as if pants, and eyes covered by the nictitating membrane or third eyelid. Perhaps some feathers are missing to further the impression that the bird is mortally ill or wounded and is at death's door. Any sudden disturbance will dispel that notion, however, as the sunbather can respond and be gone in a flash.

House Sparrows, Brown Thrashers, and Common Flickers all dustbathe in my driveway. They make little hollows in the midst of the gravel and may spend many minutes at a time wallowing in these. They twist and turn their bodies in the dust, peck at it, and do a lot of preening. Often they combine this with a sunbath. The dustbath may, or may not, be followed by water-bathing.

Anting is another form of grooming and seeking comfort, but one that is not often seen. The only species I have ever observed anting are the Common Flicker and the Cardinal. The flicker does his anting next to an anthill. He picks up ants in his beak and rubs them into his body feathers, especially under the wings and at the base of the tail. Flickers normally feed on ants, and it appears to me that when they finish the anting, they eat the ants.

I have only seen a Cardinal anting one time. Late on the evening of 19 August 1979, I saw a male Cardinal in a corner of the lawn behaving in a strange manner. He dragged his belly and tail (feathers outspread) across the grass a few inches. Then he pecked at a blade of grass. Following this, he opened his wings and ran his beak through the feathers on his body, under the wings. He repeated this several times for 3 or 4 minutes. After he flew away, I examined the spot where he had been and found a dozen or more very small ants. I was watching the bird from 20 feet away and could not see the ants. The Cardinal was molting and very ragged.

Recently, I saw a form of grooming that I had never seen before—a substitution of mothballs for ants. Earlier in the season I had placed some small mothballs under shrubbery to keep dogs away. About 1740 on 6 June 1980, a very hot and muggy day, I noticed some seven adult male Common Grackles milling around near these shrubs picking up something white in their beaks and rubbing it on their bodies, under the wings and at the base of tails. Grabbing my binoculars, I discovered that the white things were mothballs. The grackles were using these mothballs in the same manner as

other birds use ants. The following day, I observed the same number of grackles doing this "mothballing" again. They were somewhat hostile with each other, and there appeared to be considerable competition for the mothballs. I saw one bird pick up a mothball and fly off with it. In a day or so after this activity took place, I noted that all of the mothballs placed under the shrubs were gone. I have also noted that a number of grackles are molting.

A molting bird, depending upon the stage of the molt, can be a pitiful, sometimes comical sight. It can also be difficult to identify at times if one does not already know the bird well. I have seen many a bald-headed Cardinal and Rufous-sided Towhee. Towhees, Brown Thrashers, Gray Catbirds, and once in a while, an American Robin will have all tail feathers missing at the same time. This affects their running, walking, and flying movements. To me, a Brown Thrasher without its typical long tail resembles a tiny brown heron, especially since it has such a long beak and yellow eyes. It is funny to see a bird with a loose feather sticking straight up on its back. Cardinals, especially, tend to loosen breast and belly feathers in large patches that hang down around their feet like the droopy drawers of a little guy I used to see in comic strips. It may be my imagination—I try not to be anthropomorphic—but it seems as though birds that are completely disheveled attempt to stay out of sight as much as possible, as if ashamed to be seen. In birds whose plumage, sleek and colorful in spring, plays a large part in attracting a mate, there must be some awareness that the beauty has faded and gone.—GTW

## BRIEFS FOR THE FILES

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- TREE SWALLOW:** One was very early on 29 February at Lake Surf, noted by Tom Howard.
- BARN SWALLOW:** John Andre and Bud Pollock observed one on the McClellanville CBC on 16 December.
- FISH CROW:** Rare in the piedmont in winter were 10 near Townville, S.C., on 15 December (Harry LeGrand), and one at Raleigh on 26 January (Gail Whitehurst).
- LONG-BILLED MARSH WREN:** One was seen by Merrill Lynch on the Raleigh CBC on 15 December.
- SHORT-BILLED MARSH WREN:** Notable inland records were one seen on the Chapel Hill CBC on 30 December by Fritz Reid and Martin Stumpf, and two observed by Douglas McNair at Santee refuge on 22 February.
- BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER:** Two were seen by Mike Tove, Kevin Hints, and Dan McElroy at Raleigh on 14 December. Also notable were two at Santee refuge on 19 January (Douglas McNair) and on at Clemson on 20 January (Sidney Gauthreaux).
- WHITE-EYED VIREO:** One observed singing on 9 March near Newport, N.C., by John Fussell III and R.J. Hader might have been an overwintering individual.
- BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER:** Single individuals, all probably late fall and early winter stragglers, were noted on CBCs at Raleigh, Durham, and Fayetteville, and near Morehead City on 19 December (Thomas Newport).
- ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER:** Tom Haggerty observed one on the Roanoke Rapids CBC on 1 January.