

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Predators

In the fall of 1977, an immature Red-shouldered Hawk took up residence in my neighborhood. I saw it often—flying low over treetops, perching in tall pines, or being pursued by Common Crows. Once I even came upon it drinking water from the creek in a wooded area. On 28 October 1977, in midmorning, I was taking a break and sitting in my backyard just watching birds and squirrels. Three very small Gray Squirrels, only recently out of the nest tree, were playing on the trunks and branches of trees as I watched. Suddenly, without any warning, the Red-shoulder swooped down from the top of a tall pine, plucked a little squirrel from the side of a tree and flew off in the direction of the creek. This all happened with the speed of lightning, so it seemed. As I sat astounded (probably with mouth open), the other squirrels began a hue and cry that went on for half an hour or so. I once saw a Red-tailed Hawk in a tree eating a grown Gray Squirrel, and a friend told me of seeing a Red-tail take an adult squirrel from its nest; but I rather figured the squirrels were too large for a Red-shoulder to handle. However, the baby squirrel was quite small and totally inexperienced in the ways of hiding and fighting. It was the element of surprise, however, that made the catch easy for the hawk. It may have been waiting in that tree for some time.

All of us expect hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls to prey on other creatures, including birds; but other birds are predators on birds, too. Everyone knows of incidences where Blue Jays have robbed a nest of eggs or nestlings, and almost everyone knows the same of Common and Fish Crows. I have seen crows steal an egg from an American Robin's nest and fly overhead with white eggs in their beaks while being chased and pecked by Common Grackles. But the grackle is a predator, too.

On 4 April 1976 I saw a Common Grackle kill and eat a fledgling House Sparrow. I was looking out my kitchen window and the sparrows were feeding on birdseed scattered in my driveway. As with a hawk, the attack was swift and sure. It ended a long-standing mystery. The grackle severed the head of the baby sparrow and flew off to eat it, leaving the rest of the body lying where he killed it. For some years off and on, in springtime, I would find the headless body of a House Sparrow lying about the yard and wondered what had killed in that manner. I have, from time to time, seen grackles chasing sparrows and warblers; and I have observed that smaller birds, such as Rufous-sided Towhees, Cardinals, and Robins become concerned and agitated if grackles are near their nests or newly fledged young.

It is difficult to remain objective when predation occurs in your backyard, for we tend to think of the birds we feed and water as our own special pets. However, their

lives, at best, are short. Natural predators have their own place in Nature's balancing. A pair of birds whose nest is robbed will start over again. In our neighborhood, the numbers of the various species remain fairly constant from one year to another, although the bird population explodes every summer.

The Value of Lists and Records

Many bird watchers keep lists of birds they have seen—in their own yards, on bird counts, on field trips. In fact, every so often an article on bird watching suggests this be done and gives examples as to how it should be done. Carolina Bird Club prints Daily Field Check Lists, which are handy in many ways.

I am a compulsive lister. I list birds daily, monthly, yearly. On every trip I take, birding or not, I note the birds I see along the way. I have lists for birds on the coast and in the mountains; I have a life list and a list of birds for North Carolina; I have a Wake County list, a list of birds seen in my yard and immediate vicinity, and a list of birds seen in the larger neighborhood area. I even have a "heard bird" list—birds I have not seen, but heard, such as the Olive-sided Flycatcher, Bachman's Sparrow, Whip-poor-will, and Chuck-will's-widow.

Then there are the index cards on which I record the yearly comings and goings—spring and fall arrivals and departures. I have a card for every bird I have ever seen, where first seen and when. Sounds like a big undertaking, doesn't it? It did not come about all at once, but has built up over a period of years.

Why list, you ask? What on earth can you do with all this information? Well, I'll tell you. These records have served to furnish quarterly reports for *American Birds*. They tell me when a particular species among the migrants is early, late, or on time. They enable me to spot increases or declines in the population of various species. In the 10 years or so I have kept records, I have observed a number of changes, some due to loss of woodland habitat in the area. Other changes, such as the decline of Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers following two very hard winters, can be accounted for. Buy why, I ask, are there fewer Summer Tanagers and Yellow-throated Vireos than 5 or 6 years ago?

Memory alone is not reliable; names, dates, and places must be accurately recorded if one is to make any sort of contribution to research. When requests for information on a specific species of bird come my way, as they do once in a while, I can go to my records and lists to find the answers. As the seasons begin to change, I can flip through the index cards to see what bird I might expect to see on what date. If weather fronts are right, off I go to look for these birds. Many may pass through my yard, but others I can expect to find in other parts of my suburban neighborhood. The neighborhood includes a park, several creeks, and a lovely (to me) overgrown weedy spot where once there was a pond.

About the only kind of information on which I am weak is that relating to nests. For one thing, few birds actually nest in my yard. Predation by cats and crows is a problem. Because I find it most difficult to be objective about the birds I feed, I really do not enjoy the nesting season at all. Of course, I am aware of some nests, but I never go near them lest I lead a predator there. I make notes on the daily lists regarding nests, the young when they are fledged, and so forth. Many of the birds I feed come here for handouts to feed the young and often bring the fledglings here. In this manner I keep up somewhat with the progress of the nesting season. But there are times when it is pure bedlam as the adult birds compete for the food. It is an unnatural situation when birds of different species that normally stay out of each other's way come together. They become very aggressive, and I am not sure this is a good thing.