

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Backyard birding comes into its own in February. If one does not already have a feeding station, we recommend this as the optimum time to initiate a feeding program. Natural feed has been diminished or depleted. Winter residents are moving about in search of food. Permanent residents are staking out nesting territories, thereby sending others of their species in search of new grounds. The migrants have only a few weeks in which to build up fat deposits to sustain them on the long journey north. These factors mean an increase in numbers attracted to feeders.

Subtle changes in appearance are taking place daily. Colors are becoming more brilliant as pre-nuptial moults are taking place. By the middle of February, one can see a few White-throated Sparrows whose throats and head stripes are a "freshly painted" white. Purple Finches seem to glow. Goldfinches turn from olive drab to sunny yellow. The more birds you have and the more time you devote to watching them, the greater your chances of seeing something of interest. Perhaps you will note an unusually marked or colored bird. Or a species new to you will appear on the scene. It is an excellent time to study the ways in which birds solve eating and drinking problems.

February is a good time, too, to become familiar with bird songs and calls. With the exception of the mountains, perhaps, most of the permanent residents are singing loud and clear toward the end of the month. On mild days, when the need for constant feeding is diminished, many of the winter residents such as Dark-eyed Juncos, Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and American Goldfinches are breaking forth into song. Woodpeckers begin drumming in earnest. Common Flickers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers seem to prefer the increased volume and resonance that comes from beating their tattoo on metal gutters, streetlight covers, power poles, and metal transmission line towers.

Spring migration has begun in late February. Large flocks of Common Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and American Robins may suddenly appear in your backyard. Bluebirds are on the move. Scatter some seed along a hedgerow and you may see a Fox Sparrow. You may have some less desirable visitors, too, such as Common and Fish Crows or a Sharp-shinned Hawk. By the end of the month, "skywatching" is good for hawks and waterfowl flying northward.

We have had some interesting and exciting observations this past winter. We have heard of many more. We are delighted to have received reports from a number of you CBC members. We want and need your contributions to make this department a success.

Now That's Using Your Head!

It was Bird Count Day along the Pamlico, in Beaufort County, 4 January 1981. A winter temperature of 25 degrees F (dropping to 19 and lower during the night) I knew would bring our bird friends. Glancing over the bird bath, I was surprised to see a

Pileated Woodpecker sitting in the middle, boring away at the edge to break the rim of ice so he could drink . . . all 18 inches of him sitting there, frustrated and drilling away. Every few seconds he'd raise his head to relax before starting to drill again—not noticing the finches, Fox Sparrows, and Blue Jays coming in for a landing and zooming quickly into the cover of a nearby holly tree.

Chickadees and nuthatches going in and out and up and down the tree distracted me for a moment, and then a male Eastern Bluebird flew over and perched on a holly branch close to my window. I looked quickly back to the bird bath. The woodpecker had bored a cigar-shaped path through the ice and was drinking! There couldn't have been much water there—and how did he know there would be any water after all his effort?

The Pileated is seen in our yard only three or four times a year, and for him to perform like a social being, on our level, and to appear just at the right time, was unbelievable. (My husband took several camera shots while this drummer was drilling and surveying the situation.) When his thirst was satisfied, the Pileated flew high into a tall pine tree and immediately his place at the bird bath was taken over by three male bluebirds. Then sparrows and finches enjoyed “bellying up to the bar,” while the bluebirds flew around them and the Cardinals did their feeding around the base of the bird bath.—DICK and DORIS PROVOST, 110 Wedgewood Drive, Yacht Club Cove, Washington, N.C. 27889

Waste Not, Want Not

No matter how long the temperature stays below freezing, the recirculating pump in my fish pool keeps a trickle of water flowing over a big rock at one end. All the birds in the neighborhood come here to drink and bathe. Sometimes the traffic is so heavy that many birds never even get their beaks wet before being displaced by a new arrival. I am accustomed to seeing birds, especially the small seedeaters, foraging on the frozen surface of the fish pool. I always assumed they were picking up seeds blown on the ice. However, on 9 January two Golden-crowned Kinglets foraged on the ice of the fish pool for several minutes. On 11 January an Eastern Phoebe dropped from a rock beside the pool to the ice and pecked at it several times before flying away. Examination of the ice revealed many leaves protruding from the frozen surface, but I saw nothing that resembled an insect or a part of one among the bird droppings, leaves, and shredded husks of seeds that littered the ice. One possible explanation is that these highly insectivorous birds were recycling semi-digested food from the droppings of the other birds. Although I have absolutely no proof of this idea, it is not without precedent. I've seen Rough-winged Swallows on the ground picking tidbits from horse droppings, and this happened in the summertime when insects were readily available. Of one thing I am certain, kinglets, phoebes and swallows always have a good reason for the rare occasions when they forage at ground level.—ELOISE F. POTTER, Route 3, Box 114 AA, Zebulon, N.C. 27597

Skywatch!

In the early afternoon of 18 January 1981, I was watching an immature Red-tailed Hawk soaring over my back yard. All of a sudden, I spotted a much smaller hawk dropping down on the Red-tail from above. Putting my binoculars on the two birds, I noted that the smaller one was a small, light falcon with a dark banded tail. The falcon dove at the Red-tail's back, causing it to break from the circling pattern and move away. The falcon would fly away a short distance, turn and attack again. This behavior continued until both were out of view. I identified the falcon as a Merlin. I had seen a Merlin fly over my yard on 7 January 1981.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607

More on page 56

Audubon found them, sometimes with success and sometimes not. The Carolinas are well covered, of course.

I found the book highly entertaining, with many insights into Audubon's character, as well as that of his wife, Lucy Bakewell. Audubon's weaknesses and strong points are thoroughly explored. Besides a general index, there is a bird index with fascinating names: tickle-asses, tinkers, tell-tale godwits, loppers, Cincinnati gulls, and bullbirds. It was a personal satisfaction to me that Audubon confused the Lesser Scaup and the Greater Scaup, my own *bete noir*.—LOUIS FINK

BACKYARD BIRDING

(Continued from page 40)

Like Catchin' Fish in a Barrel

Red-shouldered Hawks are permanent residents along Moccasin Creek, which forms the boundary between Wake and Franklin Counties near Zebulon, N.C. At all seasons of the year these birds hunt for snakes, salamanders, frogs, and ditch eels (*Amphiuma*) in the many small wooded tributaries, including the spring at the bottom of my hill. On many occasions I have seen small birds freeze or take cover when a hawk circled the yard. Once the neighborhood birds mobbed a Red-shouldered as it innocently tried to dine on a freshly caught *Amphiuma*. This gave me the impression that small birds do not distinguish between Red-shouldered Hawks, which prefer aquatic prey, and the other *buteos*, which are more likely to take warm-blooded prey. However, the events of 30 and 31 January 1981 strongly suggest that small birds do know one hawk from another.

Light snow began falling the morning of the thirtieth. By noon the ground was lightly covered, and before nightfall 2 or 3 inches had accumulated locally. About 0900 a subadult Red-shouldered Hawk perched in a tree some 25 feet beyond the feeder farthest from the kitchen window. Many small birds—Cardinals, Pine Siskins, Purple Finches, Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, Pine Warblers, and assorted woodpeckers—continued to feed and remained undisturbed even when the hawk took flight.

About 1030 the next day, the Red-shouldered sailed past my study window, apparently en route from the feeding area to the spring. At 1615 the big bird was again perched near the feeders, and the small ones again appeared unconcerned, although they prudently avoided drinking from the water trickling over a rock at one end of the fish pool, almost directly under the hawk. The moving water maintains a small circle of open water at the base of the rock even when the rest of the surface is frozen solid, as it was on the thirty-first. I watched the hawk constantly, hoping to get a good look at the wing linings when the bird flew. The hawk was obviously alert and watching for prey, but it made no attempt to molest the feeding birds—not even the one bold soul that perched on a limb no more than 10 feet above its head. About 1650 the hawk suddenly dropped to the small circle of open water. Although the bird's head, body, and feet were hidden by a rock, I could see the wings flapping several times before they came to rest held partly open by the rocks on each side of the bird. The hawk raised its head and stood motionless. A few moments later it hopped to a flat rock nearby, clutching a large frog, apparently a Bullfrog because the venter was white with many dark spots. A minute later the hawk flew away with its prey. "Like catchin' fish in a barrel," I thought. Although the small birds paid no attention to the successful hunting expedition, they returned to drink at the pool shortly after the hawk departed.—ELOISE POTTER, Route 3, Box 114AA, Zebulon, N.C. Zebulon, N.C. 27597