

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

At last the calls for items from you folks out there have been heeded. We hope that as you see what others have sent in, even more of you will respond. Our thanks to all the following contributors.

Dinner's Ready—Come and Get It!

In April we had a brood of White-breasted Nuthatches raised in a bluebird house mounted on a pole above our lower deck. The house is positioned so that we look down on it from our dining area. One particular morning the adult bird was acting strangely. It was hanging head down, waving a good-sized moth in its bill in front of the hole. After a short while one of the young flew out of the hole and then, another. The adult birds continued to feed young in the nest for another day or so. I did not see the others fledge.—MARTHA S. FREDERICK, 262 Howard Gap Road, Tryon, N.C. 28782

A Titmouse with a Sweet 'Tooth'

On several occasions this summer (1981) we observed a Tufted Titmouse drinking sugar water from our hummingbird feeder. We believe it to be the same bird each time as it had a pattern of approaching the feeder. The feeder hangs over the edge of a second-story deck. The titmouse would come to the floor of the deck, hop under a deck chair and up to the back of the chair. From there it flew and perched on the edge of the red plastic flower of the feeder. The titmouse positioned itself so as to reach inside the flower from the top. Because the yellow perforated center of the flower had dropped out, the bird could get its bill in through the hole.—MARTHA S. FREDERICK, 262 Howard Gap Road, Tryon, N.C. 28782

It was, Indeed, an Ill Wind

On the morning of 5 October 1981 Rose Williams found a Ruffed Grouse dead in a second-floor window of her home in Boone, Watauga County, N.C. The house is near the base of Howard's Knob, at the edge of a second-growth hardwood forest reaching the western property line. I have occasionally seen and heard Ruffed Grouse in these woods. The dead bird was lodged 4.1 m above ground in a .76 x .45 m section of a 1.7 x .9 m window. We believe that the bird hit the window during the high winds of 2 October. Rose and her husband John heard a mysterious thud that day and saw a feather in a lower window the next day. Even though the bird had been dead at least 3 days, I found it to be stiff but not putrid. The only obvious injury was a cut on the right foot. The impact was hard enough to penetrate both panes of double glazing and push in the inner window screen. I photographed the bird, removed it, and temporarily

preserved it by freezing. Due to the size of the bird and force of impact, it is the most unusual window kill I know of.—JOSEPH K. WILLIAMS, 812 Faculty Street, Boone, N.C. 28607

A Possible Reason Why Sparrows (Ubiquitous Weaver Finches) Quarrel

“A quarrel of sparrows,” a term of vengery applied to a flock of the seemingly anti-social weaver finches we know as House Sparrows or English Sparrows, is a very apt phrase because these birds seem forever in combat or contention over a pile of manure or less substantive possession of equally dubious value. Many observers say that in addition to male versus male battles over females or territories, often several males will attack a female without apparent provocation! This fighting behavior does not seem to follow a particular “pecking order” or take place only on the fringes of territories; rather, it may break out at any time between usually compatible flock members. Recently, I have watched closely as a group feed at my window ledge and in the adjacent shrubbery. Many young, subadults, and “courting females” beg food to elicit a paternal response from the males, who usually feed the persistent beggars. Those with still-visible soft gapes are always fed, but as they grow older and bolder, soliciting all adult sparrows, male and female alike, the gape retreats and the entire beak hardens. This stage signals the maturing bird is well able to feed itself; but it has now acquired the potentially dangerous habit of approaching strangers for “handouts.” Careful observations showed these intermediate birds were subject to sudden attack by birds that formerly fed them (thus teaching them not to be so trusting?). Certainly such learning experience might prevent their innocent but fatal approach to shrikes, cats, or humans, and so have survival value for the individual and the species.

Some other reasons may be suggested for this almost unique intraspecies behavior—ritualistic flock-bonding, for instance, since all observers as well as participants become more agitated as a fight progresses. (Some cannot contain themselves and join the fray after watching from ever-closer vantage points, although the source of the contention could hardly have involved them directly.) Whatever the other stimuli that trigger “quarrel” response in the House Sparrow, the practical effect of a rite of passage for young birds must rank as important to survival, and should be considered as one of the possible reasons we so often see or hear “a quarrel of sparrows.”

Among mammals, the Beaver exhibits a sort of rite of passage, in which the 2-year-old young are forcibly driven from the parental lodge to establish their own.—DANIEL M. WATSON, 107 A Hope Street, Greenville, S.C. 29601

Rearing Out Cheepie

The 1981 season was not one of the very best for martins at Raleigh. A cool snap in May caused four pairs to lose broods, and hot, dry weather in mid-July wiped out attempts at renesting. Insect failures caused all late broods to be abandoned, a very rare thing in adult Purple Martins.

The latest brood of all consisted of four young, and all but one died. That one bird, about 2 weeks of age when we rescued it, was lively and seemed determined to live although it was little more than skin, bones, and feathers. We tried feeding the waif raw hamburger and boiled egg. At first we had to poke the food down the reluctant bird's throat, but as little Cheepie—as we named our new pet—gained strength he became more cooperative. I say he because of the bird's huge, blocky head. For the next few weeks my son David and I spent much of our spare time scurrying after grasshoppers and crickets, and for once I found a use for the Japanese Beetles that insist upon infesting my garden.

There are many old-wives tales about martins. One insists that a young bird consumes its weight in food each day. Maybe some do, but Cheepie, once he regained



CHEEPIE

his strength, put away about 1 ounce per day, which was about one-half his weight. From a stub-tailed fledgling at 2 weeks, Cheepie grew into a sleek 4-week-old with a forked tail. At 4 weeks martins leave the nest, but are still dependent upon the parent birds for at least 2 more weeks. We let Cheepie practice flying indoors. Although he seemed tame, we knew he might fly away to starve if we let him venture outdoors.

By the time Cheepie was making his first short flights, he was accompanying us to the cotton fields for our daily work. One morning in early August the young martin escaped from our work van and flew away. Oh well, nature was bound to call sooner or later. But when we arrived for work the next morning, we found Cheepie in a pine thicket waiting to be fed. He had no qualms about coming to David's hand while William Brown fed him grasshoppers. We allowed Cheepie to sleep at the research station for the remainder of that week and learned that he had learned to drink on the wing like his wild brethren. That weekend we placed him in a gourd to roost outdoors. The next morning, Cheepie was gone.

I like to think that he returned a few days later with some of his wild kin. Six martins, including two young of the year, perched on our TV aerial. One bird sailed low over our heads before departing southward. Maybe it was Cheepie's way of saying thanks and goodbye.—JOSHUA A. LEE, 5104 Newcastle Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27606

[Note: Stories about raising baby birds are fairly commonplace, but we felt this one, about a Purple Martin, most unusual and of interest to everyone.—GTW]

This department encourages reports on observations of bird behavior. One never knows when something really significant may turn up and a real contribution can be made to the literature of ornithology. It is all right to raise questions as to the meaning of such behavior, and even to do a bit of speculation. We would, however, caution our readers to resist the temptation to draw positive conclusions. For if we do, we can be certain that our statements will be challenged. Sharing the things we see birds do with other birders will enable us to learn whether or not we have made a real discovery. So please continue to let us hear from you.