

# Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

The cold, damp, miserable winter of 1981-1982 is nearly over as this is being written. For many folks it brought in some unusual birds to the backyard feeders. By far the most exciting visitor was the Goshawk seen by Dr. and Mrs. Walton C. Gregory of Raleigh. A complete write-up of this sighting appears below. A neighbor of mine only a few blocks away had, on different occasions, a Palm Warbler and two White-crowned Sparrows. We did not have any of these aberrant birds—just plenty of those to be expected, eating us out of house and home!

## **A Brazen Predator, the Goshawk**

When we returned home in northwest Raleigh in May 1981, after several weeks' absence, we were surprised to find that a young game cockerel had taken up residence near our bird feeder, which had been kept supplied by a neighbor while we were away. Casually named Henry, the cockerel, showed little sign of domestication and when flushed, flew skillfully among the large pine boles of our 13-acre forested place. By October Henry was nearly full-sized, a proud-looking, beautiful bird of red-orange and black—iridescent to green and blue. M.P. immediately fell in love with Henry and by October had determined to visit the poultry exhibit of the North Carolina State Fair, where she talked an exhibitor of game fowl into giving her one of his prize pullets. After 2 days of through-the-wire acquaintanceship with Henry, the pullet was allowed to fly out to join her wild spouse. Wild as he, she stayed close by his side, under cover by day and on the same limb by night. We named her Mathilda.

Happy seemed the lot of Henry and Mathilda in warm full sunshine that slanted under their boxwood refuge. Then on gray 18 December we saw a large gray hawk rise from near the boxwoods. There lay Henry scattered and torn while his great predator brazenly perched front view on a low limb not 30 feet away. W.C. walked to within 40 feet of this hawk before it elected to move another 30 feet and a little higher. Its great gray wings looked, when spread, to be more than a meter from tip to tip. Perched profile view on its second perch, the bird showed its great head with a distinct white stripe over the eye.

The hawk returned to its kill, but we saw it only at a distance on 20 and 21 December. Mathilda, meantime, had disappeared. We thought that the great hawk had lifted her small body away. How wrong we were. She hid by day and visited the feeding area only in the darkest twilight of morning and evening. The hawk returned in morning twilight on 28 January when it perched so that M.P. was able to observe its white undertail coverts and to count five distinct gray undertail bars. We did not see

Mathilda for 6 days. At this writing (11 February 1982) she is still with us and still crepuscular.

We report this to be a sighting of the Goshawk in Wake County, N.C., on 18, 20, and 21 December 1981 and on 28 January 1982. We base this identification on the hawk's large size, dark gray color, whitish underparts, white eye stripe, white undertail coverts, long tail, and five gray undertail bars. Additional support for this report lies in the size of its kill, its brazen behavior, and the species of its kill.—WALTON C. GREGORY and MARGARET P. GREGORY, 3808 Blue Ridge Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27612.

## **Birding Tastes and Preferences in *Felis domesticat***

I'm sure Bird-lovers and Feliphiles (they are often the same) have watched and wondered why the Housecat, ever the renowned Mouser, is always an even greater Birder, to the dismay of human birders as well as human cat-keepers. In the spring of 1981, I had to witness helplessly the successful stalk by a "stray," polite euphemism for a feral feline, of a group of four Gray Catbirds. (That's *Cat*-bird, Pussy, not *Cat*'s-bird!) After a field of weeds was mowed, they were left with little cover. The alert feline just stood his ground, despite the birds' scolding, my bursting a paper bag and throwing gravel while advancing menacingly and shouting "SCAT," until one brave but foolish defender dared venture within the killing compass of his claws. One more lucky leonine luncher, and one less lucky catbird. "Why?" I wondered aloud, "Never a usurping Starling, an overabundant House Sparrow, nor ever a messy Rock Dove; always some naive, native songbird." (The only bird my carefully controlled Siamese cat ever caught was a big Common Flicker, the tell-cat-tale yellow shafts strewn like rose petals down the cellar steps, as if the guilty kitty were soliciting praise from her surprisingly unsympathetic owner.) Watching the behavior of the catbirds, I was intrigued by the apparent suicidal attitude of the territorial defenders who were willing to approach and try to drive away an enemy that was their nemesis. Why didn't they have sense enough to let the cat alone? Surely it could not climb into the fragile branches they could safely perch on out of reach. Or, were the birds not experienced enough to avoid the danger?

The housecat is out of its natural range in North America; no other predator on the catbird's nesting grounds closely resembles it in either size or propensity. Our native Bobcat, or Bay Lynx, is so large that small songbirds must be beneath its dignity. And when our native songbirds migrate to Mexico or Central and South America, they encounter only the chiefly nocturnal Margay and the Ocelot; again, too large to be serious threats to small game. In Europe, though, our imported nuisance birds have had the Eurasian Wildcat for a small predator model, and so may have learned to cope with a wild cat's wiles. Probably the catbird is the cat's bird, for it appears to have no instinctive fear of the housecat. This raises some interesting questions: At what point did the Gray Catbird learn to imitate the cat, a very effective deterrent to some avian enemies? Or does the bird really imitate the cat's "meow" at all? And does this call play into the cat's paws?—DANIEL M. WATSON, 107 A Hope Street, Greenville, S.C. 29601

Mr. Watson's observations and comments are interesting and entertaining. However, our experience with housecats and birds causes us to take exception to the premise that songbirds do not recognize the housecat as an enemy—at least not the birds that dwell in cities and suburban areas. When I was a child, my mother nearly always had a cat. My father was always concerned when any of these pets brought in a songbird. We noted that cats do not discriminate as to the kind of bird caught but go for whatever is easiest to catch. Here where I live, there are a number of cats roaming the neighborhood. They do make a catch from time to time (although they are well fed). I have seen a cat catch a House Sparrow and also a Starling as well as Rufous-sided Towhees,

Cardinals, and other desirable (to me) songbirds. They take their greatest toll during the nesting season, robbing nests that are low to the ground and pouncing on fledglings. The adult birds do tend to "go after the cat" when their young are threatened—and some, such as the Blue Jay, Mockingbird, and Brown Thrasher, can succeed in their efforts to drive the cat away. Blue Jays are especially effective in an attack on a cat with their shrill cries and tendency to join forces to mob a predator. I always know when a cat is around because all of the birds (usually from safe perches) set up quite a fuss. The successful hunters are those which find a hiding place under cover of darkness, and patiently wait until an unsuspecting bird gets near, then spring quickly and make the kill. The neighborhood cats know where the birds hang out, and so I have a constant running battle with them, especially in spring. They have learned that they are "persona non grata" here and take their leave as soon as they see me and/or hear my slow "hiss." In heretofore published material in this department, I have commented on the fact that even the young fledglings appear to recognize and fear housecats and that they can discern the difference between a cat and a Gray Squirrel or Cottontail Rabbit.—GTW

### **More on the Brown Thrasher**

In response to my article on the Brown Thrasher (Chat 45:93) came a letter from a South Carolina thrasher watcher.

"I have a long association with and many memories of this species. In 1959-1962, I kept a record of nests in my yard in Anderson, S.C. The density of nesting birds there was always amazing to me. We had 10 acres, 5 in pasture, with dense shrubbery all around the house and next to the fences. One year, I had five pairs of thrashers nesting there. I recall that I wanted to get photos of a nest in a Wisteria vine. The nest was about 4 feet from the ground, containing several nestlings a few days old. My friend who was to take the pictures was concentrating on the photography when one of the adult birds appeared and almost took his eye out!

"This present snow reminds of the first winter I lived here on my farm in upper Anderson County. I had just put a new load of gravel in front of the stable hallway. The ground was covered with snow, but a few feet of exposed gravel was free of snow just inside the stable. I watched a thrasher pick up pieces of gravel in his beak and sling them away (sometimes several feet) until he got down to dirt, where he either fed on something he had exposed, or was obtaining gravel."—ADAIR M. TEDARDS, Route 4, Box 70, Easley, S.C. 29640

### **Brazen Predator II**

Backyard birding at our place has not been as much fun this winter due to frequent visits from a Sharp-shinned Hawk. She appeared almost daily and made a few kills. The birds here developed a bad case of paranoia. The slightest sound of a "hawk alarm" note had them all dashing for cover. There were times when even a small airplane high in the sky might trigger the alarm. All of the above is by way of background for the events that took place the afternoon of 11 February.

It was a day with mild enough temperatures to permit me to just sit in the yard and watch the birds. There is a Blue Jay here with the toes on its right foot permanently curled under. Because it is fairly tame, and crippled, I had been giving it some special goodies, bits of pecans in small enough pieces so it could handle them. I had just fed this bird, and it had flown into a nearby tree to rest and preen. I turned my head to look at something else when I heard the jay let out a most terrified scream. I turned back to see a very large accipiter going after it across the yard. Without taking time to think, I got up and ran at the hawk, "hissing" and clapping my hands (as I would at a cat). This did scare the hawk away. When I turned back to look for the Blue Jay, it was gone. A few

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## BOOK REVIEW

### BIRDLIFE AT CHINCOTEAGUE AND THE VIRGINIA BARRIER ISLANDS

Brooke Meanley. 1981. Cornell Maritime Press, Centerville, Md. 21617. 117 p. Softcover. \$7.50.

This book provides an invaluable introduction for a amateur naturalists intending to visit the Chincoteague area. The short chapters are an interesting combination of ones on specific birds (e.g. The Atlantic Brant), groups of related birds (e.g. Strikers & Flood Gulls), ecologically related species (e.g. Birds of Oceanic Littoral Zone), and activities of bird students (Banding Royal Terns, The Christmas Bird Count). *Chat* readers may be especially interested in Meanley's chapter entitled "Some Unusual Bird Records" because it gives some insight into rare species likely to show up along the Carolina coast. Indeed, many already have done so. Numerous charts, drawings, and black-and-white photographs add to the value of the book, which should prove enjoyable to anyone wishing to become familiar with the area and perhaps to those who already are.—DSL

### BACKYARD BIRDING

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fluffy breast feathers were on the ground at the spot I had last seen the jay—so the hawk did make contact. I was sure, however, that when the hawk flew, it did not have a bird in its talons. That Blue Jay was so "shook up" that I did not see it again for almost 24 hours. For several days, the crippled jay was quite shy about coming here and away from cover.

An hour or so after the hawk attempted to get the Blue Jay, it returned and, like a shot out of a gun, dived toward a spot within a few feet of my chair where some White-throated Sparrows were feeding. We startled each other, and the hawk left without catching anything. This time I watched it fly up onto a branch of a large oak tree in the front yard. I went up front and looked at the hawk carefully with my glasses. When it turned its head and saw me, it flew off across the street into the woods. What surprised me, however, was that the hawk was not our resident Sharpie, but a fine adult Cooper's Hawk. I surmised that it was migrating north and was looking for a quick meal. Now I am fascinated with hawks and know that they have their niche in the scheme of things, but somehow, I don't want them taking my "pets," not even the crippled ones to which they are entitled by Mother Nature.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607