

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Man Versus Rodent Versus Owl

This morning (29 March 1983) my daughter, Mrs. Ray Adkins, phoned to tell me that a Great Horned Owl had fluttered down from the high pines in her garden. Earlier, it had hung from a branch, upside down, by one claw. She had called the South Carolina Wildlife Department. Before anyone arrived, I went over to see the bird. It was sitting in a corner of her shaded lot, wings spread out, rather like a cloak. Soon a man and woman from Wildlife arrived. The man was wearing something like a welding glove, and they brought with them a large corrugated air-freight box.

At their approach, the owl promptly flew over a 6-foot fence and into a neighbor's dog pen. The young setter and Doberman-Pinscher therein did not seem to notice the owl. My daughter gave the man a bedspread, which he used to capture the owl. It was placed in the box with some difficulty as the sharp talons had become entangled in the spread. They took the owl to the Riverside Zoo for examination by a veterinarian, who determined that it had probably eaten a poisoned animal, which affected its central nervous system. The owl lived only one day at the zoo.

Being an amateur bird watcher, I had something interesting to add to my life list, although I must say it is definitely a situation of being watched by very colorful eyes when you are near such a bird.—DAVID J. ABRAHAM, 3128 Woodsen Circle, West Columbia, S.C. 29169

A Mating Ritual Totem?

Here are some new (for me at least) observations in the old habit of flickers pecking on metal chimney covers. On a recent trip to Tulsa, Oklahoma, I watched a pair of Yellow-shafted (Northern) Flickers cavort around their nest in an old willow. The male would fly to a limb directly in front of the hole, rather softly announcing his arrival each time. The female immediately came out of the hole and perched on a small limb (non-passerine?) to its left. The pair then copulated and the male immediately flew to a nearby chimney where he "drilled" the metal pot before flying off. I watched this pattern being repeated at least seven or eight times a day for three consecutive days, beginning as early as 0630 and ending as late as 1830. I hardly know what conclusions might be hazarded, but the routine was fascinating, never varying at all. The male did

not even alter his chimney, although several were equidistant to the hole and another even on the same house. I wonder how many other species incorporate some sort of totem in the mating ritual?—A. LEIGH DeNEFF, 1623 Park Drive, Raleigh, N.C. 27605

Living Dangerously!

Today (30 October 1982) I was walking on our apartment grounds. We have 155 units spread widely, with large paved areas for parking, much grass, plenty of blooming camellias—and nothing remotely resembling woodland.

Over the paved street, low and 10 feet from my face, came a Sharp-shinned Hawk, chased by three Starlings. The rapid maneuvering went on before me for several seconds. I know that Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks can be similar in size, but this hawk was the smallest accipiter I've ever seen, not much bigger than the Starlings.—LOUIS FINK, L-6 Tau Valley Estates, Rocky Mount, N.C. 27801.

[Note: It is not uncommon, especially in the fall, to see a Sharp-shinned Hawk or a Cooper's Hawk being mobbed in the air by a large flock of European Starlings, but this sounds most unusual.—GTW]

Whitehurst's Laws of Backyard Birding

Nearly everyone is familiar with at least some of the famous Murphy's Laws—things that can foul up most any undertaking you plan. Well, I have come up with a few laws relative to backyard birding. These have turned up over and over again. Perhaps you can add something to the list.

1. Never say "never." Just as soon as you tell another birder that such and such a species is never seen feeding on the ground (or in the trees), you will see it doing that thing.

I told a friend once that while I often see Fish Crows perch on the tall transmission line tower near my home, American Crows never do. This winter, long before the return of Fish Crows, the American Crows in the area frequently perched on the tower.

I have always said that Mourning Doves never eat anything but grain, birdseed, or fruit. This winter, I observed one eating bread!

I used to join with the many other observers in saying that House Sparrows do not eat sunflower seed. They do! They will sit in a feeder that has only sunflower seeds and prevent any other birds from partaking.

2. Just as you are about to locate a new, unusual, or interesting bird in a nearby tree, your neighbor will walk over and begin a conversation—and the bird disappears.
3. While you are studying a "different" bird in the driveway, a car will turn in and frighten it away before you are sure of the field marks.
4. Before you can decide what the new bird on your feeder is, someone or something will frighten it away.
5. When you go to investigate the strange bird call you just heard, along comes a helicopter or a garbage truck, or someone starts up a power mower, drowning out the sound.
6. On a bitterly cold, blustery winter day, when you can hardly stand to linger outside to watch birds, along comes a Sharp-shinned Hawk. All the birds dive for cover and remain out of sight for at least 10 minutes!—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607