Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Mixed-up Birds

As any experienced bird watcher knows, you can't find everything you see in the field guides. Here are a couple of examples of some really mixed-up birds.

On 30 July 1983 I saw a warbler in the Flowering Dogwood outside the breakfast table window. I studied it for a minute or two before it flew out of sight. It had a yellow head and breast; blue back, wings, and tail; white belly and under tail coverts; two white wing bars like those of a Northern Parula; a hint of yellow at the bend of the wing; and a very small warbler bill. No olive back patch or black eye line was seen. My best guess is a Northern Parula X Prothonotary Warbler hybird. Both species nest nearby, along Moccasin Creek. Fortunately my son David saw the bird and confirmed the field marks. At least I know the bird was mixed up instead of the bird watcher.

Seeing this strange individual reminded me of a report Kay Sisson submitted to the CBC Records Committee some years ago. At the time it seemed too strange to publish as a General Field Note without a supporting specimen or photograph, but perhaps it should be mentioned here as a believe-it-or-not curiosity.

"On 26 May 1976 Norme and Betty Frost, Clyde, and I were parked at Big Witch Overlook (elevation 4160 feet) at milepost 460 between Soco Gap and the terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway in Haywood County, N.C. In perfect light of midafternoon we saw a Cerulean Warbler in mature plumage fly 15 to 20 feet from us across the highway and disappear in trees opposite. While trying to squeak it into view, from the same direction and place flew even closer to us a STRANGE BIRD. It perched on an oak tree limb 15 feet in front of us for several minutes so that we could easily study it.

"Indigo Buntings are common in the Blue Ridge area. There is only a half-inch difference in the size of the Cerulean and the Indigo. It was that size one way or the other. What struck us immediately was a white crown and the much deeper blue plumage—I'd say two-thirds Cerulean and one-third Indigo (no iridescence)—and the fact that the underparts were almost completely the strange mixture of blue, except for a white chin, throat and narrow breast area, the [throat and breast] separated by the typical narrow black band of the Cerulean. It had a white forehead and the wide white crown spread from

eye to eye. It had white wing-bars. Note this: It had the stubby dark bill of the bunting. It did not sing or chirp and finally disappeared into the understory."

Well-documented intergeneric hybirds are fairly common among the wood warblers (see Parkes, Auk 95:682-690). That the mating of a Cerulean Warbler with an Indigo Bunting could produce viable young, however, seems too strange to be true. Nonetheless, the skeptical reader is cautioned not to disparage these reports, for he may be the next to witness the startling results of avian dalliance.—ELOISE F. POTTER, Route 3, Box 114 AA, Zebulon, N.C. 27597

Martins and Dragonflies

Although there is little evidence that birds have any formal knowledge of economics, our feathered friends seem to be, nevertheless, good economists. Birds are attracted to concentrations of food and frequently select from among the food items available those that provide the greatest return for the least expenditure of effort (careful shopping?).

I don't know just how carefully Purple Martins shop, but I do have reason to believe that they are discerning shoppers, certainly when there are young in the nest and the demand for food runs high. From about the seventh day after hatching onward, the parent birds specialize more and more on dragonflies, large, soft-bodied insects that probably represent the maximum return in food per foray for a species agile enough to catch these swift flyers. Martins are up to the task, as the following data will show.

There were 10 broods ranging in age from about 10 days to 2 weeks in my colony in Raleigh, N.C., when I began observations 3 June 1983. Between 1705 and 1735 on that day the 10 pairs of parent birds delivered 56 dragonflies. Commencing on 4 June, I kept records of all food items delivered. Between 1110 and 1140 on that day, the parents delivered 98 dragonflies and 67 other, mostly unidentifiable, items of prey. Between 1700 and 1800 on 6 June, the ratio was 100 dragonflies to 70 others, and on 12 June between 1730 and 1800, 57 dragonflies to 86 others.

During the sampling periods between 4 and 12 June, 53% of the prey items delivered were dragonflies including about 50 specimens of *Epiaeschna heros,* the largest dragonfly known to occur in North Carolina. Much of the prey delivered 12 June was a large mayfly, an insect favored, when available, about as much as dragonflies. There were several butterflies, mostly the Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*) and *Vanessa* sp.—JOSHUA A. LEE, 5104 Newcastle Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27606