



Roundtable

... with Louis C. Fink

Starlings vs. Red-headed Woodpeckers

During my boyhood in Berryville, Virginia, Red-headed Woodpeckers were abundant; every farm had its quota. A 2-acre lawn shaded by mature White Oaks was alive with them in the nesting season.

I first saw European Starlings in Berryville in 1922. In following years I watched them usurp the woodpeckers' nest cavities. The starling's eviction operation is a horror. Woodpeckers defending their eggs or unfledged young were often pecked to death by the starlings, the blows of whose rapier-like beaks were directed to the head.

The old oaks in Berryville still exist, filled with starlings; the town has had no Red-headed Woodpeckers in many decades. The last substantial group of them in Clarke County nested on the Burch McKay farm near Millwood. They were there because the starlings were shot by the McKays' small sons. With the boys gone, starlings have taken over.

When I entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1927, Red-headed Woodpeckers were common, especially at nesting time, in the oak grove which is still on campus. Making my home in Chapel Hill, I saw the starlings re-enact their take-over. What was probably the last stable group of nesting Red-headed Woodpeckers in Chapel Hill made their final stand in the early 1950s at my home on East Rosemary Street. I controlled starlings for a time with a .22 caliber silent air rifle. When I moved out, the starlings moved in.

Ornithologist Eugene P. Odum, of the University of Georgia, tried to console me by saying that there would always be some wilderness areas which the starlings would not occupy. His prediction is borne out by a breeding-bird survey in the McCain Tract in Hoke County, N.C., and reported by Mary Kay Clark and Eloise F. Potter in the Spring 1982 issue of *Chat*.—JOE JONES, Route 2, Box 302, Berryville, Virginia 22611.

Newspaper Gleanings

In Santa Monica, California, a blackbird made life miserable for bald-headed men by dive-bombing them. The ornithologist at the County Museum said that blackbirds can be very aggressive, and may see bald-headed males as predators.

A complete set of Audubon's *Birds of America* has been sold for \$1.77 million. The 435 prints were sold separately, with the Trumpeter Swan bringing \$45,000. And poor John James could hardly give his pictures away!

Here in North Carolina, three Golden Eagles and two Bald Eagles have been released, in the mountains and at Mattamuskeet, respectively. So keep your eyes open.

Seventeen million birds of 18 species left Christmas Island mysteriously 6 months ago. Now they are returning, and watchers say it is all tied up with El Nino, those warm currents in the Pacific that made our local summer so miserable.

Raised Eyebrows Department

In the *Washington Post* for 19 August 1983, Paul Berg presents an article about Claudia Wilds, "whose life list contains 3,200 species." The Smithsonian recently published her *Finding Birds in the National Capital Area*. Mr. Berg writes that "it takes time and money to build a long list of birds, although there's no rule against counting birds that other people show you. Even birds spotted at the National Zoo can be counted." In fairness to Miss Wilds, we stress that Mr. Berg does not say that Miss Wilds made that rash claim. If we can claim birds in a zoo, put this writer's life-list down at over a thousand!

Mr. Berg makes another slip when he writes that netting and banding birds is done "largely for the tactile pleasure." Wonder where he got that idea.—LCF

On the Evolution of the House Finch

In the spring 1983 issue of *Chat*, mention was made of John W. Aldrich's finding that the House Finch of the eastern United States has undergone significant morphological changes since the parental stock was released some 40-odd years ago. The fact that the birds have adapted so successfully to a radically different climate than the one they presumably evolved in is rather startling in itself. Curiously, the House Finch has not spread from the West to the East on its own, although there is evidence that the birds have moved eastward in the Great Plains as that part of the country has been settled up.

Assuming that the birds nesting about Raleigh are typical of the eastern population, I've been struck by what sounds to these ears like changes in song pattern and delivery. I recall that the House Finches of Southern California, and those about the Bay Region, rendered a rather languid warble that had little carrying power. The local birds have a loud, rapid song that puts me in mind of the petulant delivery of the Chaffinch of Europe. Also, I've noticed that some of the House Finches on the North Carolina State University campus incorporate a phrase that sounds like the "what cheer" note of the Northern Cardinal.

The Chaffinch lives in low trees and does much feeding on the ground, and that seems to be the style the local House Finches are opting for. Are our House Finches turning into Chaffinches, sort of?—JOSHUA A. LEE, 5104 Newcastle Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27606