

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

A Subadult Martin Learns to Avoid Wasps?

A strategy that has evolved in insects to reduce predation is a combination of distastefulness and aposematic coloration, the theory being that the potential prey “advertises” its noxiousness through conspicuous display. The predator, once initiated, remembers to avoid insects with color patterns it associates with unpalatability.

Rarely does one observe a “novice” being “initiated.” The following observation might qualify as a case in point. On 12 May 1983, at 1030, I watched as a 1-year-old Purple Martin captured a slow-flying insect. The martin quickly discarded the insect and flew onward scratching at its bill with its right foot. I rushed to where the insect had fallen and found a paper wasp (*Polistes* sp.). After a few minutes of preening, the wasp flew away, apparently none the worse for the encounter.

I have no notion as to how a wasp might taste to a bird, nor do I perceive that these rather drab insects are aposematic in their color patterns. I am reasonably sure, however, that the bird in question was stung by the wasp it had targeted as prey. Therefore, there must be plenty of incentive for birds not specialized to deal with wasps to learn to avoid these truculent hymenopterans, and the fact that many nonstinging insects seem to mimic wasps suggests that they do. I'm happy to report that the martin victimized by its intended victim also survived, wiser for the experience, one might hope.—JOSHUA A. LEE, 5104 Newcastle Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27606

Blue Jays, Where Are You?

We began to notice, in late fall, that the number of Blue Jays around our place was way down over the normal complement. As winter wore on, we saw them less and less often. We had only one bird to come, once in the mornings, for a hand-out until late January, when it was joined by a second bird. Now, at the end of February, there are only the two jays, and they only show up mornings and once in later afternoon. On our Christmas count, we found very few Blue Jays compared to previous years. It has also been noted by other birders that jays are scarce. Did they go farther south, having somehow been aware of what a cold winter we were to have? Was there a poor nesting season in the Northeast? Or have their ranks been decimated by some disease—we haven't found any bodies! If anyone has any answers, we would like to hear them.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607

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This is the first record for the Lazuli Bunting in the Carolinas. It has not been recorded in Virginia or Georgia, and there appear to be very few records anywhere east of the Mississippi River.

Clay-colored Sparrows in Fall in Mountains of North Carolina

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In the early afternoon of 17 October 1982, two Clay-colored Sparrows (*Spizella pallida*) were feeding in north Asheville, N.C., on ground with sparse, low clumps of grass where I regularly scatter chick feed. Also feeding there were a White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and six to eight House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). They were in an area about 10 x 11 feet, sometimes with a foot or less separating individuals. I watched them for several minutes with binoculars, through a window, at about 25 feet. About 30 minutes later I saw a single Clay-colored Sparrow in the same place.

LeGrand (Chat 45:84) lists three recent winter records for the North Carolina coastal area, and Potter, Parnell, and Teulings, in *Birds of the Carolinas* (UNC Press, 1980) say this species is a rare transient along the coast, but they mention no records for the mountains. This Asheville sighting indicates that at least some of the birds seen along the coast may migrate there through the mountains of this region rather than coming down the coast from a crossing farther north.

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A Fair Trade-off?

Our suburban backyard is a far cry from what is normally considered good habitat for the Fox Sparrow. We do not see them very often, and then only during migration or on a snowy winter day. However, we have been most delighted during the winter of 1983-1984 to have had a Fox Sparrow feeding here daily. It appeared on 17 December, just in time to get in on the Wake Audubon Christmas Count. Perhaps the bird is a bird-of-the-year and had no previous experience in picking a winter territory. Perhaps it chose to stay as long as there were plenty of food, a supply of water, and a few evergreen shrubs for cover. The bird is very shy and prefers to feed at first light in the mornings and in late afternoons. It is also very quiet. I have never heard it utter a sound—not a scold note nor a call note of any kind. It has developed a taste for my hand-out food of cornmeal and peanut butter, and occasionally darts out from cover to grab a piece. Mostly it feeds on wild-bird seed and sunflower seed that fall on the ground while the House Finches are scrapping on the hanging feeder. The bird is a beautiful rich red-brown color, similar to that of a Brown Thrasher. This is the first winter in many years that we did not have a thrasher, so maybe it was a fair trade-off for both of us; a Fox Sparrow for a Brown Thrasher for me, food and water versus the solitude of a thicket for the bird.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607