

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Backyard Nesting, a 25-year Synopsis

Do birds nest in your yard? The chances are they do. Unless you take pains to make your premises utterly barren of all vegetation, and seal up all crannies about your buildings, birds of one kind or another are likely to gain a toehold and build a nest. If you, like me, plant a good-sized garden in the back and flank it with hedgerows and a virtually unmanageable briar patch, you can expect birds to flock in. Add to that some trees here and there, a well-fertilized lawn, and certain specific encouragements by the lord and master of the estate, and you have a veritable paradise for birds. When we moved to the site in west Raleigh, it was little more than an abandoned pasture turned suburbia. Thus it has been interesting to observe the site change over time and the nesting bird population change in tandem to wit:

(1) Eastern Bluebird. The bluebird nested regularly when the site was quite open, that is up until about 1968. Possibly the vegetation became too dense for the bird's liking, or the neighborhood cats became too numerous.

(2) Chipping Sparrow. It nested in low shrubbery during the time the bluebird was in residence and disappeared about the time the bluebird left.

(3) Northern Mockingbird. Friend mocker arrived about when we did and remained. The local pair seems to rotate nesting in my yard and a neighbor's seemingly on an odd-year basis.

(4) Brown Thrasher. Nests regularly in the bramble patch.

(5) Gray Catbird. Likes the hedges and brambles; one nest found thus far.

(6) Rufous-sided Towhee. Nests regularly in brambles.

(7) Brown-headed Cowbird. Towhees were observed feeding a juvenile cowbird in 1978.

(8) American Robin. Robins commenced nesting on the premises about the time the bluebirds departed, at a time when the trees and shrubs became tall enough to give the robin the combination of open space and nesting height the bird seems to require.

(9) House Wren. The House Wren seems to like the same texture of environment as the robin. A pair has nested in a neighbor's yard for about 10 years. In 1983 a pair nested in a gourd in my yard for the first time.

(10) House Sparrow. The House Sparrow is not encouraged to nest on the premises. Nevertheless, about three pairs nest each year in thick shrubbery on the property line.

(11) Tufted Titmouse. The titmouse nested in a gourd under the eaves in 1983.

(12) Orchard Oriole. This species has nested for 2 years in succession in the top of a pecan tree.

(13) Northern Cardinal. The cardinal prefers some crepe myrtle bushes in a neighbor's yard, but occasionally nests in a tall shrub in my yard.

(14) Blue Jay. Nested in a pecan tree in 1983.

(15) Purple Martin. A colony has nested in the backyard for all of the 25 years we've dwelt in west Raleigh. In recent years the colony has stabilized around 12 pairs, but the number of pairs has varied from 6 to more than 20.

(16) Cottontail Rabbit (?). A rabbit is not a bird, but when a mother rabbit nests on the back lawn in plain view of the breakfast-nook window and raises four young, it's worth reporting. We expect the squirrels to commence nesting in our pecan trees any day now, the better to tote off our pecan crop. Any of you backyard birders out there need a squirrel?—JOSHUA A. LEE, 5104 Newcastle Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27606

[Note: Changing habitat, influx of cats, House Sparrows and Starlings have combined to push bluebirds out in our suburban area, too. We do not put up any birdhouses with holes large enough for bluebirds as House Sparrows will take over. They are persistent, however. One spring I observed them building an elaborate, domed nest high up in a Virginia Pine, showing their heritage as weaver finches rather than sparrows.—GTW]

Backyard Birding on the Road

Once a birder, always a birder. No matter where we go on vacation, we are always aware of the birds at the places we stay, be it the backyard of a home, or a motel. My adult children live in the Denver area of Colorado. It is kind of rough to have them so far away, but this provides a wonderful reason to go visit. My son lives in Littleton, which is just south of Denver, and the area there is part of the Great Plains (with the Rocky Mountains visible to the west). A visit there last fall provided some most interesting backyard birding. Imagine waking up in the morning to the song of the Western Meadowlark and raucous calls of the Black-billed Magpie. Or how would you like to hear the familiar call of the Northern Flicker and when you look up to see it flying overhead, note that the wing linings are red instead of yellow? From a nearby lake, one often sees gulls flying on their way to a favorite feeding place. The smaller species is Franklin's Gull! New species to us easterners, yes! But what is more interesting to a backyard birder is that the Western Meadowlark behaves just like our familiar Eastern or that the magpie reminds one of our cocky Blue Jay—just bigger, flashier, and noisier.

Perhaps one of the neatest motel birding experiences we ever had was in Sanford, Florida, a few years ago. The motel was on a small peninsula jutting out into Lake

(Continued on Page 75)

heard at the beginning of the incident, I found a nestling White-breasted Nuthatch that apparently had been pulled from the nest and dropped by the woodpecker.

Similar episodes have been reported by other observers. Roach (Fla. Field Nat. 3:19) saw a male Red-bellied Woodpecker remove three young and one egg from a nest that may have been its own or that of a neighboring pair of the same species. Roach heard one of the three nestlings fall into the underbrush. He could not determine whether the adult was a parent trying to move the young to another cavity or a competitor attempting to clean out the cavity for its own use. Watt (Wilson Bull. 92:249) saw a female Red-bellied Woodpecker remove three young in succession from an American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) nest. Neither woodpecker was seen eating the nestlings.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers do not always act as predators when they encounter young of other pairs or other species. Curry (Wilson Bull. 81:470) describes an instance when a fledgling Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*) was fed by an adult Red-bellied Woodpecker that was in the process of carrying food to its own young still in the nest. Pursued by the begging titmouse, the woodpecker backed away several steps, but leaned forward and fed the young bird when it continued to advance.

BACKYARD BIRDING

(Continued from Page 70)

Monroe (on the St. John's River). Here was a spot where land and shore birds abounded in early May. Hundreds of migrating Tree Swallows were feeding on thousands of strange flying insects, called "love bugs" by the natives. There were Black Skimmers (a surprise as this was fresh water), Black-necked Stilts, Caspian Terns, assorted sandpipers, and Brown Pelicans. But the most delightful find of all was a flock of over a dozen White Pelicans. Also of interest were the female Red-winged Blackbirds in the tall grasses beyond the parking area—they had a pinkish cast to their body feathers! Could it have been something they eat? If feeding upon shrimp can enhance the rosy color in flamingoes and spoonbills, we wondered, could it be that these blackbirds, which appeared to feed from time to time at the water's edge, were gleaning tiny shrimp? What really threw us for a loop for a while were the strangely colored ducks and geese we saw. We later learned that they had escaped from a nearby zoo some years earlier and interbred with the local domestic species—the combination of European and Asian species with Mallards produced some quite bizarre specimens.

Wherever one stops overnight in Florida can be exciting and give close-up views of herons and egrets, White Ibis, and Wood Storks. So you see, you can take your backyard birding with you wherever you go and add another dimension to your travels.