

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Normal, Abnormal, and Unusual Feeding Habits

Many criteria are used to identify the new bird in the backyard or field. Field guides are undoubtedly the number one tool. Songs and call notes come second. Observation of feeding habits: what kind of food, where obtained and how, can be helpful. Is the bird eating insects, earthworms, seeds, fruits, rodents, small birds, fish, or shellfish? When on a feeder, is it eating seeds, suet, or paste? Is it feeding on the ground, on the trunk of a tree, high in a tree, or while flying in the air? Noting the physical adaptations of the bird—what kind of bill, feet, and toes—gives valuable clues. For instance, warblers and other small, insect-eating birds have small thin bills for poking into cracks and crevices, snatching bugs from under leaves, and pulling tiny worms from their hiding places. Seed-eaters tend to have heavy, conical bills for cracking the toughest of seeds. Feet are adapted to give maximum benefit in finding and obtaining food. There are webbed toes for water birds; heavy, supportive toes for the running ground feeders; strong, slender toes placed with three forward and one back to enable the perching birds to grasp the slenderest twig or stalk of grain; and the two toes forward and two toes back for climbing up and down the trunks of trees.

We backyard birders have, in a sense, domesticated our birds. We provide feeders and food not normally found in the wild. We offer birds seeds and fruits that do not normally grow naturally in our area, such as sunflower seeds and oranges. We put up suet, provide pastes of cornmeal and peanut butter, and scatter cake and bread crumbs about. They “learn,” in the absence of plentiful natural foods, to eat foods that are a far cry from the norm. Even so, for the most part, we tend to find that seed-eaters stay with the seeds while insect- and fruit-eaters prefer suet, pastes, and oranges. Those large, omnivorous birds such as Blue Jays, crows, starlings, and grackles—and House Sparrows, will take anything that is edible.

Just when the birder thinks he has the feeding habits of birds well in mind, along comes a bird eating something that surprises us. We have come across a number of these instances and feel they are worthy of note. Some are really unusual. Others are uncommon, or perhaps very natural but infrequently observed.

Those who are familiar with hummingbirds at sugar-water feeders and flower beds may assume that their diet consists only of sweet liquids. This food supplies the much-

needed energy for these active little creatures, but they also need protein. They get this from tiny insects within the flowers, but we seldom see this feeding behavior. Kitty Kosh of Wilmington, N.C., observed a Ruby-throated Hummingbird hawking gnat-sized insects about the trunk of a pine in August 1985. It must have been quite a sight—one this writer has never seen. Have you?

Another observation Mrs. Kosh made later—in December—was of a Northern Oriole perched on the hummingbird feeder with a beak thrust into the feeding hole, drinking the solution. A pretty neat trick considering the size of the oriole. But that is not all she saw. The oriole took a liking to thistle seeds and was seen partaking of these with apparent gusto. Mrs. Kosh also saw a Carolina Chickadee sipping sugar water from the hummingbird feeder. This reminded me that some years ago Martha Frederick of Tryon, N.C., reported that a Tufted Titmouse had developed a taste for sweets. Many years ago I was told about a Yellow-throated Warbler coming regularly to a hummingbird feeder. Perhaps this seems unlikely until one considers what these same species do under natural circumstances. Several years ago, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker had worked diligently placing his ring of holes into a hickory tree in our backyard. As the sap began to rise and flow in early March, we heard him putting up quite a clamor. Investigating the cause of his agitation, we discovered a Northern Oriole, clinging to the bark of the tree and feasting on the sap as it oozed from the sapsucker's holes. Subsequent observation from time to time revealed that other species had followed suit. We noted that there were Yellow-rumped Warblers, Pine Warblers, a Carolina Chickadee, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted and Brown-headed Nuthatches, a Downy Woodpecker, a Tufted Titmouse, and (more surprisingly) a Dark-eyed Junco feeding on the flowing sap. The junco was unable to maintain his hold on the slippery bark and soon gave up his attempts. As often happens, in the bird world, birds watch other birds; when they see others feeding, they will give the new food a try.

Another instance of orioles, this time Orchard Orioles, feeding on a natural sweet, nectar, comes from an article published in *The Chat* in 1980 by Joseph M. Wunderle Jr. He had observed the orioles getting nectar from the blooms of Trumpet Creeper vines. They did not thrust their bills inside, as hummingbirds do, but used them to slash openings at the base of the flower.

We recalled that flowers or flower buds are often on the menu for certain species on a regular basis. We have noted Northern Mockingbirds and Northern Orioles eating the whole flowers of yellow crocus. Cedar Waxwings are frequently seen gobbling the buds and flowers of fruit trees, especially the flowering crabapple. The waxwings and Purple Finches often ate the buds from Sweetgum trees and lilac bushes. We have found Evening Grosbeaks devouring the buds of maples and elms. We wondered about the food value of flowers and then recalled that the pollen therein is all protein—the agent that brings so much suffering to victims of hay fever.

Getting back to some of the more unusual feeding habits of birds at the feeders, we discovered insect- and fruit-feeding birds eating sunflower seeds. Our own notes tell of Northern Orioles, in late winter, pushing aside the Purple and House Finches on a feeder and eating the sunflower seeds. One male I observed used his toes to put the seeds into his mouth; closer watching revealed that he was eating only the seeds that were out of the shell. During the same period that year, we saw a Carolina Wren in the feeder helping himself to seeds. Both birds used their thin, sharp bills to hold the finches at bay.

On the other side of the coin, we have found seed-eaters making use of the suet feeders. When Pine Siskins were abundant, and, shortly before time for them to leave in the spring, they would be seen perched on a suet feeder, gathering fat to sustain the long flight north. This winter (1986) on a very cold morning, we noted an American Goldfinch eating a small amount of suet.

Not all birds come to feeders, no matter what is being offered. Others come only rarely. Golden-crowned Kinglets are among the rare visitors. I have seen them pick off tiny bits of suet deposited on branches near a feeder by woodpeckers wiping off their beaks after feeding. One winter we had a small flock of four kinglets that fed rather regularly on a mixture of grits and bacon drippings, which had been plastered on the trunk of a tree to make feeding easier for the woodpeckers. In this instance, the Golden-crowns were attracted to the food after seeing one Ruby-crowned Kinglet, two Brown Creepers, and a number of Yellow-rumped Warblers eating it.

Jim Boozer, of Brevard, N.C., watched a female Summer Tanager eating black oil sunflower seeds late last summer. He timed the bird's ability to open and eat a seed, finding it took her 14 to 15 seconds as compared with only 4 to 5 seconds for an Evening Grosbeak or Purple Finch. The finches crack open seeds with their strong beaks and flick the inside into their mouths with their tongues. Mr. Boozer did not say how the tanager went about opening the seed. We have noted that the chickadees and titmice open a seed by holding it with the toes of one foot and pecking the seed. Blue Jays do this also. Brown Thrashers place the seed on the ground and hammer it with their long bills. Nuthatches and woodpeckers place the seed in a crack in the bark of a tree and peck it open.

This winter we have had one of those hanging redwood "stick" feeders—the kind with holes bored through it. We have kept it filled with a paste of cornmeal and peanut butter. It was intended for, and used by, the small birds such as chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and Downy Woodpeckers. However, of late, a pair of American Robins and a Northern Mockingbird have discovered the feeder. At first they picked up the crumbs that fell as one of the small birds ate. Then, in their eagerness to get more food, they began trying to perch on, or peck at, the feeder. At first they were only able to peck the food loose and pick up whatever dropped to the ground. Later on, all three were landing on top of the feeder and bending heads down to eat directly from it. The mocker seems to be more successful at maintaining his grip and balance than the robins. And, if you know mockingbirds, this one has claimed the feeder as his own and chases the robins away whenever he sees them. The smaller birds still try to slip in when the mocker is away.

How about it, readers? Surely many of you have seen some out-of-the-ordinary bird behavior in your own backyard. Won't you share your experiences with us?

Dancing Heron Outfoxes Gulls!

In the fall of 1985, while walking along the ocean beach, a few yards south of Topsail pier, we noted a gathering of gulls and one lone Great Blue Heron. A fisherman had just thrown out a pile of fish which he had filleted—leaving the heads and backbones and tails all in one piece. The gulls, including Herring, Ring-billed, Laughing, and two Great Black-backed, were squabbling and hassling each other to get at the spoils. This in itself is not unusual. However, seeing the heron in their midst was. While wondering what his

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COMMON REDPOLL: Truly remarkable, and presumably the latest ever for the Carolinas, was one seen at a feeder in Long Beach, N.C., on 21 May by Chris Marsh.

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chances of getting a fish were, we saw him begin to dance around. He hopped a few inches from the sand, simultaneously raising his enormous wings and fanning the air with them. He created a considerable space with this activity and quickly grabbed a fish with his long beak. Moving slightly away from the crowd of gulls, he worked the sandy fish around in his bill, getting it into a head-first position, and proceeded to swallow the prize—in the same way all herons do with a live fish they have snatched from the water. This heron had been hanging around the pier for several days—a fact that had surprised us, as we usually see herons only in the marshes. Apparently this bird preferred a relatively easy hand-out to his normal fishing patterns.

A New Kind of Watering Hole

Near the Topsail fishing pier is a motel. It has a boardwalk leading down to the beach. At the point where the boardwalk meets the stairs leading to the motel, there is an outside shower for the use of guests wishing to rinse off salt and sand. The shower leaks a little when turned off. We noted a number of times that a small flock of Boat-tailed Grackles had discovered that by perching on top of the shower-head and leaning downward, they could get drinks of water. Only one bird could drink at a time, and there was always a queue of grackles awaiting a turn whenever “people traffic” was light.

We were reminded of a similar way that we saw many species of birds getting water from a leaking faucet some years ago. We were camping in a Ponderosa Pine forest in central Oregon. There was a large water-storage tank, and a steady drip came from the faucet. Just at dusk, we noted Purple and Cassin’s Finches and a Mountain Bluebird, among others, drinking here. In habitats where water is scarce, birds discover any and all sources of fresh water, whether they be natural or placed by the hand of man. We are all familiar with our backyard birds’ dependence on a birdbath or two. While we probably do not think much about it, we humans have made our impact (in a good sort of way) on the environment by making it possible for birds to find water. Offering water, as well as food, gives us many more birds to watch and enjoy. It often permits us to see birds we might otherwise miss.