



Roundtable

... with Louis C. Fink

A Frenzy of Waxwings

I have been a birder for over 40 years, and on 22 February 1987 I saw the largest flock of Cedar Waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) that I have ever seen. As I left the parking lot of the Methodist church in Edenton, N.C., I saw an enormous flock of waxwings wheeling over a grove of trees across a field from the church. I drove over and parked in the grove and observed them for several hours. The birds were resting in the tops of several cypress and oak trees; every 15 minutes or so they would fly down into several big Red Cedar trees and feast on the berries. Actually, it was more of a "feeding frenzy" than a feast; they hung from the branches by the hundreds, some upside down, gobbling berries frantically. At the height of the activity I estimate that there were more than 2000 birds present. Small flocks of 30 to 100 were constantly leaving and heading north while other flocks were dropping from high in the sky to the south and joining those resting and feeding. During the 2 hours I estimate I saw more than 4000 Cedar Waxwings. Shortly after I left at 12 noon, it commenced to rain, and the rain lasted all afternoon and into the night. There was also a constant trickle of Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds going over headed north, so I suspect that these birds were all going north just ahead of a weather front.—PARIS R. TRAIL, Routh 4, Box 268-A, Edenton, N.C. 27932

Are Starlings Really Responsible for the Decline of the Red-headed Woodpecker?

As I have previously stated (Chat 47:98), I watched European Starlings usurp nesting cavities of the Red-headed woodpecker at Berryville, Virginia, in 1922 and at Chapel Hill, N.C., from 1927 until the early 1950s. In the late 1940s I stood up in a Chapel Hill Bird Club meeting at the home of Adelaide Walters and said that starlings were ousting Red-headed Woodpeckers from their nest cavities in Chapel Hill. The instant I sat down Richard Weaver said there was nothing to what I had said. That has been the reaction I have received when I communicated on this subject with others, including my old friend Gene Odum, George A. Hall of West Virginia University, Roger Tory Peterson, Herbert W. Stoddard, and the people at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

Mr. Peterson was the only one to admit that I may be right. He brought up a question I could not answer at the time. He wondered why the Red-headed Woodpecker had

almost disappeared in New England and other parts of the East while the Red-bellied Woodpecker had extended its range in New England and was thriving elsewhere in the eastern United States. Now I believe I can answer Peterson's question.

In the spring of 1986 I had a Red-bellied Woodpecker nesting cavity under close and constant observation. From March to May I shot and killed 60 starlings, sometimes as many as three in a single day, at this one woodpecker hole. Unlike the Red-headed Woodpecker, the Red-bellied never engaged the starlings in combat. The female did not take any part in opposing them. The male, when a starling went in the hole, just hopped around near it, sounding a disagreeable distress note that often alerted me to the starlings' presence. Sometimes the male woodpecker would fly to the hole and look in briefly.

With me constantly on hand to shoot the starlings, the Red-bellieds continued to try to nest and had actually laid eggs by mid-May. On 24 May I had to be away from home. When I returned, the eggs were on the ground under or near the nest tree, an old English Walnut. The pair then went elsewhere.

The behavior of the Red-bellied Woodpecker under these circumstances was entirely different from that of the Red-headed Woodpecker, which fights the European Starling to the death (literally), and it is always the woodpecker that is defeated. Often the Red-headed Woodpecker is killed during combat or so badly crippled that it dies later. I have seen this happen and have picked up the dead woodpecker. The difference in behavior allows the Red-bellied Woodpecker to survive and try nesting elsewhere, a second chance often denied the more aggressive Red-headed Woodpecker.

One ornithologist wrote me that Red-headed Woodpeckers are so aggressive that it is doubtful if a bird the size of a European Starling could do anything with them. He failed to understand that the Red-headed Woodpecker's aggressiveness is the very thing that has doomed it.

I am now 80 years old, and I have watched Red-headed Woodpeckers since I was a youngster in Berryville. They were one of our commonest nesters before the arrival of starlings more than 60 years ago. In the spring I loved to watch Red-headed as they flew through the trees sounding their joyful cries. Now they are all gone, and the starlings are everywhere in force. The fact that I killed 60 starlings at one woodpecker hole in a few weeks gives some idea of their overpowering numbers that far exceed the supply of suitable nest sites. The rural oak groves, oak-lined streets, and oak-shaded city parks where Red-headed once nested in abundance are still found throughout the Southeast. Sadly, nesting Red-headed Woodpeckers are not.—JOE JONES, Route 2, Box 4195, Berryville, Virginia 22611

The above account prompted me to search for additional evidence that European Starlings kill and injure Red-headed Woodpeckers or that starlings are otherwise directly responsible for the decline of that species.

Bent's *Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers* (1939) mentions competition between starlings and flickers, but not between starlings and Red-headed Woodpeckers. The Bent volume that includes the European Starling came out in 1950. It mentions several accounts of adult flickers being killed by starlings, but only one instance of a starling attacking a Red-headed Woodpecker.

In *Birds Around New York City* (1942) Allan D. Cruickshank concluded that much of the starling's bad reputation is "unfounded." Nonetheless, Olin S. Pettingill Jr. in his

Ornithology in Laboratory and Field (fourth edition, 1970, p. 202) uses the European Starling and the Red-headed Woodpecker as an example of how the range extension of one species may cause the decline of another.

The Red-headed Woodpecker account in Robert M. Mengel's *Birds of Kentucky* (Ornithological Monographs No. 3, 1965, p. 298) says: "While it is probably more numerous now than in primeval times the species has undergone a notable decrease in numbers in recent years, especially the last two or three decades Prior to about 1935 nearly all local authors either stated or implied that this was the commonest of woodpeckers, which is clearly no longer the case anywhere in Kentucky. Various reasons put forth to account for the decrease include creosoting of telephone poles, highway mortality (to which the species seems peculiarly susceptible), and the invasion of the Starling While no one, or probably not all, of these explanations may be adequate, it does seem worthy of note that the decrease in Kentucky coincided with the establishment of the Starling, as it did also, somewhat earlier, in Ohio"

Several recent studies of breeding Red-headed Woodpeckers (A.W. Reller, *Amer. Midl. Naturalist* 88:270-290; J.A. Jackson, *Condor* 78:67-76; Lawrence Kilham, *Auk* 94:231-239) mention competition between individuals of the same species as well as between Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, but there was no reference to starlings as intruders. Perhaps the presence of the observers kept the wary starlings away from the nest holes.

Evidence that the European Starling was and is a primary cause of the decline of the Red-headed Woodpecker comes from a publication released in 1986 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *The Breeding Bird Survey: Its First Fifteen Years, 1965-1979* by Chandler S. Robbins, Danny Bystrak, and Paul M. Geissler. On page 87 the authors state that the starling population showed a 14-year decrease in Canada and the Northeastern States, but there was no detectable continentwide change. The report indicates that the starling population is still increasing in the Southeast and in most regions west of the Mississippi River, but declining in that portion of the East where the species first became established. On page 34 the authors note that the Red-headed Woodpecker experienced a significant increase in the Northern Plains States and the Northeastern States, apparently in response to decreased pressure from starlings.

Those of us who live in the Southeast can only hope that the European Starling population will soon peak in our region and begin a natural decline that will permit the Red-headed Woodpecker to nest again in Joe Jones's oak grove.—EFP

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