

Chipping Sparrow: This sparrow was quite rare. Individuals were present in the sand-rim communities in Hoke County, and one was found in the same habitat at Singletary Lake in June 1983. This represents the eastern extreme of the nesting-season distribution of the Chipping Sparrow on the coastal plain. During the winter, however, these sparrows are quite common in the area.

Field Sparrow: Field Sparrows were found near White Lake at several small bays that supported farmlands of cultivated blueberries.

American Goldfinch: Though apparently uncommon, one group was heard on 26 May and 10 June 1984 in a hardwood forest on the sand rim of Bush Lake, and small numbers have been found every year since 1979 on the sand rim of the Hoke County bay.

House Sparrow: House Sparrows were recorded only at the towns of White Lake and Lake Waccamaw.

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Oddities of Color, or Lack of Color, in Birds

One of the rewards of Backyard Birding on a consistent basis is catching sight of some of Nature's oddballs. Keeping a sharp eye out for the new, unusual, and differently marked bird enables the watcher not only to pick up a new species, but also to see some of the quirks of Nature. From time to time we get reports of albino birds, strangely marked birds, and birds with extra colors not normally found.

Before we go any further, we might stop here and remind our readers that during the post-nuptial molt we can, if not careful, be fooled by split-tailed robins, no-tailed towhees, and bald-headed cardinals and jays. The post-juvinal molt can also contribute confusion. For instance, the Rufous-sided Towhee undergoes a number of changes. The finely streaked head and breast of the fledgling, as these feathers are shed, go through a series of changes until the white breast, dark head, and rufous sides are well defined. These are the times when knowing one's birds well—size, shape, calls, and behavior—saves the birder from wasting much time and energy trying to find the “new” bird in the field guide.

To see an albino or partially albino bird is always interesting. Some years we get more reports of this phenomenon than others. Whether this has any significance or not, we do not know. We do not have any statistics on the probabilities of albinism. Perhaps the observers just happen to be in the right place at the right time. However, there is something fascinating about finding an all-white bird. The finder wants to share the sighting with others, and out come the cameras to provide proof. Oftimes the local news media, always on the look-out for something different, will publish pictures of the albino bird. Such was the case last year.

The Stanly News and Press, Albemarle, N.C., ran a nice story and pictures of an albino Eastern Bluebird discovered by James and Annabel Speight of the Red Cross community in Stanly County on 18 May 1986. They found one all-white fledgling, with pink eyes. The article discussed albinism in general and pointed out that complete albinism is very rare among bluebirds. With this rarity in mind, it went on to say that the Speights found another albino fledgling in the same birdhouse from a second brood hatched in July. After the latter bird died, the specimen was donated to the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences.

R.A. DesPortes of Columbia, S.C., sent a picture of an albino Mockingbird he spotted on Edisto Island, S.C., on 29 June 1986. This bird, too, was a fledgling.

Although rare, an albino bird is easy to spot. When a bird of a different color (from that which it is supposed to be) appears at a feeder, it may go unnoticed. Once seen, though, it can attract much attention. One such case occurred in December of 1985 near Brevard, N.C. We wish to share with you this most unusual bird in the words of Betty H. McIlwain.

"On December 8, 1985 my friend, Virginia Brown, told me that a 'funny looking titmouse' had been seen at two feeders in her neighborhood. At 3:00 p.m. on December 15, 1985, I went with Virginia to her neighbor's yard. We watched this unusual bird for an hour. It made many trips to a feeder located on the deck of the house. The bird was feeding in the company of several other titmice as well as chickadees, nuthatches and downy woodpeckers. The contrast with the other titmice was startling . . . a very black back and head and a red-orange breast . . . the colors of our robin. When it was excited and the tuft was raised, I noticed a brownish tinge to the topmost feathers. . . . This bird has been a regular at the feeder during the winter and spring. The last report stated that it was seen May 15, 1986, and it is believed it has a mate." Mrs. McIlwain went on to state that the bird had been seen by a number of people. Many attempts were made to photograph the bird, but none came out very well. Possibly the black head and back were due to melanism (the presence of darker pigments than usual), another rare color deviation. The normal titmouse has the red-orange color on the sides, but it is rather pale. Such a "funny looking titmouse" certainly arouses the curiosity.

The Case of the Aggressive Towhee

All of us are familiar with aggressive behavior of birds scrapping for food at the feeders in winter. Also we see much fighting and chasing in the spring when birds are establishing territories, mating, and nesting. Generally, the latter occurs between birds of the same species. We have come to expect aggressive behavior from tyrant

flycatchers, wood warblers, and even hummingbirds. Robins and mockingbirds go after each other with a vengeance. But we do not expect such actions from the normally shy and gentle-appearing towhee.

Betty McIlwain of Brevard, N.C., an astute observer, has learned, as have we, that there are more questions than answers when it comes to why birds do what they do. She writes of an experience she had at her feeders on 13 December 1986. "At 8:50 a.m. there was activity at all feeders and on the ground. A Brown Thrasher and a White-throated Sparrow were enjoying left-over dressing from Thanksgiving that I had placed inside a wire tube feeder. Titmice and chickadees were swarming around the sunflower house, the Blue Jays were cleaning up the crushed shells from eight eggs I had thrown on the ground the previous evening. Mourning Doves, juncos, Song Sparrows and several White-throated Sparrows were pecking at the cracked corn in the area of the bird bath. A male Rufous-sided Towhee flew into the yard, landed in front of the bird bath, then moved to within 2-3 inches of the back of one of the doves. He then lunged toward the dove and caught the tip of the dove's tail. The startled dove ran and fluttered forward with the towhee hanging on until after traveling over three feet the dove made an abrupt right turn into the base of a bush at which time the towhee fell away [and] flew from the yard. At 9:24 a.m. a male towhee arrived and landed in front of the bird bath and immediately moved toward a Song Sparrow in a very aggressive manner. In a few seconds he made the same move toward a White-throated Sparrow. . . . As a long-time backyard birder I have seen 'claiming of space' by many species, but I have never seen behavior such as the towhee took against the Mourning Dove. I never saw any aggressive move toward the towhee by any of the other birds. In fact, I did not see any threat. There was plenty of cracked corn scattered over a large area. Evidently the towhee did not see things my way. What a surprise that he would or could cling to the tail tip of a fast-moving Mourning Dove!"

Well! We can certainly appreciate Mrs. McIlwain's puzzlement as to why the towhee attacked the dove when there was plenty of food for all. However, I did not find it too surprising. As mentioned in my article, "We created a Monster" (Chat 49:36-38,48), we encountered a great deal of aggression between birds of the same and other species when it came to getting food—both in winter and during the nesting season. Since we will never know how a bird "thinks," observation of its behavior is the best we can do.

Some species of birds seem to be more aggressive than others. We have noted that within a species, some individuals are more aggressive than others. So often we glimpse only one bit of behavior that may be part of an activity begun out of our sight. While we might say that a Rufous-sided Towhee is not as "feisty" as an American Robin or a Northern Mockingbird, for instance, we have noted times when two males (disputing territory) can engage in a "knock-down drag-out" fight. I have frequently seen two male towhees down on the ground, feet locked together, pecking at each other furiously. They are not always so kind to the females, either. My notes reveal that on 30 April 1978 I saw "a male towhee chasing a female towhee. She flew up to small limb of sweetgum tree. Male followed and grabbed her (with beak) by tail feathers—about one inch from tip. He held on, swinging for several seconds before releasing his hold."

Bits and Pieces, Odds and Ends, or Whatever

In response to our discussion of "Birdsong Fun" (Chat 50:10-11), Robert G. Wolk of Raleigh, N.C., wrote on 23 April 1986:

"I enjoyed your note in the current issue of *Chat* on bird songs and cannot help but share with you what is probably my favorite. It is that of the Warbling Vireo, which I used to hear while walking to work in Canton, New York: 'When I see you, I will seize you and I'll squeeze you till it squirts!' I believe the words originated with Arthur A. Allen, of Cornell, who invented many English remarks for birds.

"The Olive-sided Flycatcher is not the only beer-loving singer. The Henslow's Sparrow, perched on a weed stalk in a pasture, calls specifically for 'Schlitz!'"

Shortly after I sent copy for that column in *Chat*, I heard a Carolina Wren advertising, "T-shirt, T-shirt."—GTW

It is good to get responses from Backyard Birding and to share them with our readers. On 14 August 1987, Ric Carter of Washington, N.C., sent the following:

"I thought to share a couple of odd feeding observations with you.

"In the late spring of this year, my wife Kitty and I, on several occasions, noted a large, if not obese, female Carolina Anole around our deck. On 29 June, Kitty discovered a possible reason for the rotund stature of the lizard. She watched the Anole climb carefully down the monofilament holding one of our hummingbird feeders and spend almost ten minutes sipping colored sugar water from one of the four feeding stations. A female Ruby-throated Hummingbird even shared the feeder with the Anole without seeming to notice anything unusual.

"Near the end of July, I built and hung a doughnut feeder. . . . It has been a source of frustration for [me] and inattention for my summer feeder birds until yesterday.

"While [I was] eating dinner on the deck last evening, [the doughnut feeder] was finally visited. An immature male Ruby-throated Hummingbird flew in, and lit and grabbed something on the feeder. Although the view wasn't clear, I suspect he snatched one of the several ants moving about on the 5 X 5 inch platform. He's still the only bird to pay attention to this feeder."

As many of us are aware, birds have a healthy fear of snakes, and well they might, for snakes frequently feed on eggs, nestlings, and fledglings. Dave Abraham, of Columbia, S.C., sent along an observation dated 1 February 1986.

"On the jays, they can also scream about snakes. Last summer, when they had young on the ground in the vicinity, I heard four of them making a great racket on the fence. I went over to it and there was a large snake, snaking along at a good speed in my neighbor's yard, leaving tracks on bare raked earth. Looked like bicycle tracks. It disappeared into my flower bed, but doubled back to my neighbor's and then I saw one Jay drop onto a pile of pine straw and cock his head while he sat peering at it. I told my neighbor and he lifted up the straw and shot the snake twice. It was about five feet long and big as one's wrist. He said it was a copperhead."

For those of you who do not care for Blue Jays—see, they can do something worthwhile for us humans. Who wants a copperhead so close to home?—GTW