

General Field Notes

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Apparent Predation of Common Grackle Fledgling by Eastern Chipmunk

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On 18 May 1993 I saw an Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*) dragging a fledgling Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) across a flower bed at my residence in suburban Greensboro, Guilford County, North Carolina. There is circumstantial evidence that the rodent killed the bird.

Initially my attention was directed to the activity at approximately 1645 h by loud distress calls typical of nestlings and young fledglings. Looking out the open window of our home office to the flower bed directly under the window, I saw the wings, body and legs of a black bird moving from right to left, and the body, back and tail of an Eastern Chipmunk apparently in the process of backing across the flower bed. I concluded that the chipmunk was holding the head of the bird in its teeth. From my vantage point about 4 m away, the bird and the chipmunk appeared to be approximately the same size. At the time I observed the activity, the bird was not vocalizing, but the wings appeared to be moving independently of the chipmunk's actions.

When I opened the front door, I saw the chipmunk running from the bird, which I identified as a recently fledged Common Grackle. The bird was approximately 2 m from the site of the initial observation. The head of the bird was lying in a pool of fresh blood approximately 3 cm in diameter. The fledgling

was clearly dead, and I observed no involuntary muscle contractions. I went back inside and returned in less than 5 minutes with a plastic bag for collecting the bird. When I opened the door, a chipmunk again ran from the general area of the carcass, leading me to believe that the same chipmunk had returned to its prey. However, the body had not been moved and there was no indication that the blood, which was still wet, had been disturbed.

As I was examining the dead bird, an adult Common Grackle flew into the tree above me and vocalized continuously. Common Grackles have nested in the adjacent yard for at least the last two years and this year have frequently taken dog food from the dishes in our back yard and carried it in the direction of several tall pine trees in the yard next door. In past years, adults sometimes have been accompanied by immatures at the dog dishes and bird feeders in my yard. The fledgling probably fell or flew from a nearby nest and blundered into the chipmunk's territory.

Several Eastern Chipmunks live in and around my yard. An active burrow is approximately 7 m from the spot where I saw the chipmunk with the fledgling, but it was dragging the bird away from that burrow, rather than toward it. However, I have often heard and seen a chipmunk in a natural area at the other side of the front yard. That is the direction in which the chipmunk appeared to be dragging the fledgling and toward which the chipmunk ran each time I opened the front door.

Assuming that the sounds I heard were indeed distress calls from the fledgling being dragged by the chipmunk and that the bird was alive when the chipmunk encountered it and dead when I examined it less than 2 minutes later, then there is strong circumstantial evidence that the chipmunk killed it. Although there is no proof that the chipmunk deliberately killed the fledgling grackle and intended to eat it, the activity observed does appear to represent a case of predation rather than attempted feeding on carrion.

Eastern Chipmunks are not popularly regarded as predators of birds, although other closely related members of Order Rodentia are known to take prey occasionally and to feed on carrion opportunistically. Potter (1992) reported observing a closely related species, a Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), feeding on the carcass of a dead bird that had also attracted wasps. According to Webster, et al. (1985, p. 118), "The chief items of diet [of the Eastern Chipmunk] are seeds, nuts, acorns, and berries; they also may eat such animals as insects, small amphibians, and birds."

Other references to predation of birds by Eastern Chipmunks have not been found. The author would appreciate hearing from readers who have witnessed similar behavior or know of additional references in the literature.

LITERATURE CITED

Potter, E. F. 1992. Wasps as scavengers on dead bird. *Chat* 56:80.
Webster, W. D., J. F. Parnell, and W. C. Biggs. 1985. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland*. Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.