

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

Gray Catbird Anting at Sanderling, Dare County, North Carolina

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Anting is a behavior in which birds either place ants on their skin and plumage (active anting) or allow ants to run onto their bodies (passive anting). Active anting is often characterized by very energetic, sometimes awkward, behavior; in passive anting birds remain relatively still in a sunning posture (Whitaker 1957; Potter and Hauser 1974). Anting is a subtype of self-anointing behaviors that are observed among a variety of animal species (Weldon 2004). The behavior has been observed among a wide variety of bird species, mainly passerines (Lunt et al. 2004).

The function of anting behavior remains hotly debated. Hypotheses to explain the behavior fall into three major groups. The most popular and widely accepted is that birds ant in order to rid themselves of ectoparasites (Ehrlich et al. 1986; Clark and Clark 1990; Clayton and Vernon 1993) or feather-degrading bacteria (Ehrlich et al. 1986; Clayton 1999). Some also suggest that birds ant in order to remove distasteful secretions from ants before ingesting them (Judson and Bennett 1992). The third hypothesis suggests that birds ant in order to soothe skin irritated during the process of molting (Potter 1970; Potter and Hauser 1974).

Recent work fails to support the parasite control hypothesis (Revis and Waller 2004; Cristol et al. 2005), and no evidence was found in a recent study in support of the food preparation hypothesis (Lunt et al. 2004). However, in a recent experiment with captive Cape White-eyes (*Zosterops pallidus*), birds anted more when molting than they did when not molting (Lunt et al. 2004). The following observation of a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) anting fits best with the hypothesis that birds ant as a response to skin irritations.

On 10 August 2005, at 0702 EDT, I observed a Gray Catbird engaged in active anting. I was standing about 4 m above ground on the porch of a summer house in Sanderling, a village on the Outer Banks in northern Dare

County, NC. The bird stayed within 1.5 m of an ant mound on a sandy area underneath a tree. Upon later investigation, ants were seen crawling throughout the area, and there was activity around at least three ant hills.

The bird captured an ant in its bill and quickly applied the ant to its tail region. It repeated this behavior at least 15 times. On several occasions, the catbird stumbled backwards over its own tail, which was under its body and between its legs. The bird moved awkwardly throughout the episode. I did not see any evidence of the bird consuming the ants, which is not surprising because fruit is the major component of the catbird diet in late summer (Martin et al. 1951).

The morning was very warm and hazy (about 26 C). The area had been drenched by a thunderstorm soon after midnight on 10 August. From my vantage point I could not see any clear signs of molt in the catbird, but the bird was likely in molt, given catbirds' observed pattern of molting primaries and body feathers in August (Cimprich and Moore 1995). I observed the behavior for several minutes before the catbird flew away. I continued to watch the spot for 31 min and intermittently throughout the day without seeing additional anting behavior.

Potter (1970), Hauser (1973) and Potter and Hauser (1974) previously reported anting by Gray Catbirds in North Carolina, although not on the immediate coast. There are also other reports of anting by the species from eastern North America (Brackbill 1948; Groskin 1950). Post (1993) observed Boat-tailed Grackles (*Quiscalus major*) anting repeatedly on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, but the present report is the first from the immediate coast of North Carolina.

While this single observation does not solve the mystery of anting, the circumstances surrounding this episode provide some evidence to discuss the proposed hypotheses. I saw no behavior that would support the food preparation hypothesis. Thunderstorms likely increase the rate of molting (Potter and Hauser 1974), and this episode occurred during the annual peak of anting activity noted by Potter and Hauser (1974, see also Potter 1970; Hauser 1973). It appears possible that the catbird may have been responding to a skin irritation by anting. While this observation can not exclude the ectoparasite control hypothesis, it fits best within the framework of the hypothesis that birds ant in order to soothe skin irritations often associated with molting.

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