



## European Starling pair feeds a juvenile Downy Woodpecker

*Geof Burbidge*

Early on a cloudless summer day, 15 June 2016, I was driving westerly along Chaffey's Locks Road, halfway between Cross Road and Clear Lake Road, in the rich birding area north of Kingston, Ontario, when I saw an odd sight on a telephone line directly overhead. I pulled over and snapped a few photos through my car window of a juvenile Downy Woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens*) begging (Figure 1) and being fed by a European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (Figure 2). I exited the car as carefully as I could for the sake of better pictures but the woodpecker flushed to an elm tree in a small woodlot approximately 15 m north of the road. At this point, I became

aware of the presence of a second starling. I photographed activity in the elm for about five minutes (Figures 3, 4) while the adult starlings alternated between feeding the woodpecker and foraging in a lawn adjacent to the woodlot. At one point, one of the starlings perched beside the woodpecker holding what appeared to be a grasshopper in its beak (Figure 4). The Downy Woodpecker then flew across the road to the south and perched on a small vertical branch in a dead tree using its tail as a prop in typical woodpecker fashion (Figure 5). One of the starlings followed and perched on a horizontal branch nearby. I saw no more close interactions between



Left to right:  
Figure 1. Juvenile Downy Woodpecker begging from European Starling near Chaffey's Locks, Ontario, 15 June 2016.

Figure 2. European Starling feeding juvenile Downy Woodpecker near Chaffey's Locks, Ontario, 15 June 2016. *Photos taken through car windshield.*

Figure 3. Juvenile Downy Woodpecker that was being fed by European Starling near Chaffey's Locks, Ontario, 15 June 2016.



Figure 4. European Starling preparing to feed apparent grasshopper to juvenile Downy Woodpecker near Chaffey's Locks, Ontario, 15 June 2016.



Figure 5. Juvenile Downy Woodpecker on a vertical branch during a break from being fed, 15 June 2016.

*All photos:  
Geof Burbidge*

the birds. Shortly thereafter, the downy flew south along a hedgerow followed a moment later by both starlings, at which point I lost sight of all three. During the encounter, I was aware of no other birds in the immediate vicinity.

I was unable to imagine at the time quite how the starlings might have ended up as the woodpecker's providers. I knew that European Starlings and Downy Woodpeckers are both cavity users and thought that they might have nested close together in this woodlot-and-field landscape. Could it have been possible that

this pair of starlings started feeding one or more woodpecker chicks in a hole, or a fledged one outside its hole? Why were the starlings not occupied with their own young?

There are many reports of cross-species feeding between birds (e.g., Skutch 1961, Shy 1982). Herbert (1971) reported a single European Starling in Delaware taking over the care and feeding of a brood of American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) nestlings including the removal of fecal sacs, driving away the adult robins in the process. Qualls (1998) recounted a European Starling in Mississippi taking food to a nestling Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) in a tree hole over a two-week period, during which time the woodpecker adults were also supplying food

to the same bird and occasionally chasing the starling.

In my experience, the cries of Downy Woodpecker nestlings are particularly loud and can be heard by humans dozens of metres from their hole. The cries of hungry young birds are apparently essential to the initiation of inter-specific avian feeding (Shy 1982). Failure of the feeding species' own nest due to predation or other external reasons featured in a good number of the accounts, but there are also reports of birds distracted by the calls of nearby nestlings of another species to the detriment of their own young and even fighting with their legitimate (biological) parents for the privilege of attending to the offspring (Shy 1982, Qualls 1998).

European Starlings are known to be very aggressive at commandeering nest holes and ejecting the occupants (Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology 2018). The idea that a pair of them may have neglected their own nesting activities in favour of raising a Downy Woodpecker is not the kind of survival behaviour that might be expected from such a successfully invasive species, but perhaps a strong instinctive feeding response to pleading young birds is part of such success. Raising the young of another species might seem to be counterproductive behaviour from an evolutionary point of view, but it could be rare enough and innocuous enough not to have been selected out of the greater bird population, and may even contribute to the experience and subsequent nesting success of the birds doing the feeding (Shy 1998). What happens to a Downy Woodpecker raised by European Starlings?



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The literature suggests it might not learn what it takes to become a successful woodpecker (British Trust for Ornithology 2018). The different perching habits of starlings and woodpeckers, however, may augur well for this juvenile Downy Woodpecker being forced to make the transition to feeding itself successfully.

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### Acknowledgements

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