

American Robin attacks Red-bellied Snake

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While the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) may not be renowned as a snake hunter, it has been noted occasionally taking snakes (Sallabanks and James 1990). Many bird species are known to include snakes in their diet (Guthrie 1932, Terres 1980). The most significant predators are the hawks and owls, some species specializing in snakes (Brown and Amadon 1968). Among passerine birds, the most likely to take snakes are the various crows and jays, along with shrikes (McAtee 1932). However, given the chance, even songbirds such as Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) and a bluebird (*Sialia* sp.) have been seen eating or trying to eat snakes (Terres 1980). While the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) may not be renowned as a snake hunter, it has been noted occasionally taking snakes (Sallabanks and James 1990). This note reports another instance of an American Robin attacking a snake.

In August 2010, a pair of robins had been feeding young in a nest in the hedge

near my house at Sunderland, ON. Late one afternoon as I entered the kitchen, I noted one of the adults vigorously attacking something at the edge of the lawn near the end of the hedge.

But, obviously this was not just an earthworm. The robin would repeatedly jump forward and grab at whatever it was attacking, then jump back as if afraid of it. Something on the ground was writhing vigorously with each attack of the robin. A check with binoculars confirmed it appeared to be a relatively small snake. Since I was not surprised to see a robin attacking a snake, and being more interested in identifying the snake species and in finding out how long it was than in providing the bird with another meal, I went out to investigate.

The bird was standing inactive about 30 cm from the snake when slowly approached across the lawn. The snake had been mauled for some time and was just lying still. The snake was a Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*), most of which was tightly balled up, only

about one third of its length still lying exposed — the head end. In order to measure the length, I had to untie two knots in the snakes body, each pulled snug. They had to be teased apart carefully to avoid injuring the snake. The snake measured 30 cm long. Although mauled, the skin was not broken, and it moved away some time later under its own power when left alone at the back of the house.

When approached, the robin made no attempt to take the meal it had just worked to get. Was the robin only interested in killing the snake, did the bird realize that the snake could not be eaten readily with knots in it, or did the bird consider that the snake was too large? Netting (1969), after observing a robin attack a Dekay's Brownsnake (*Storeria dekayi* — called Northern Brown Snake), tried unsuccessfully to feed one (size not given) to the bird, suggesting that robins were only interested in killing snakes, perhaps recognizing them as predators of eggs and young when of larger size. Several others, however, have noted American Robins eating snakes.

Friedmann (1929), reported robins killing Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis* sp.) of 10 and 13 inches (25.5 and 30 cm), and of trying to feed a Garter Snake to a nestling (a Brown-headed Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, placed in the nest). The snake observed by Davis (1969) appeared to be about as long as the robin (ca 23-27 cm), and was carried off by the bird. A Garter Snake of about 25 cm was reported fed to a nestling (Richmond 1975), and a Garter Snake of 30 cm was reported partly eaten and the rest carried off (Erickson 1978). It seems more likely that once killed a robin would attempt to consume a small snake, particularly when also feeding nestlings.

It is tempting to speculate that tying their bodies in knots might be some sort of anti-predator strategy for a snake. However, if this were the case, why was the head left exposed, allowing a bird to finish killing the snake? The violent writhing on the ground seemed to be enough to cause the robin to recoil repeatedly (behaviour also noted by Davis 1969). While the head could bite, on a small snake, that does not seem to



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be much of a serious threat. And, the robin could have torn the snake into pieces for consumption (as observed by Erickson 1978) even if knotted. Tearing a snake apart, however, required considerable time and effort for a bird not well equipped for tearing flesh.

The robin that had killed a snake observed by Erickson (1978) also easily abandoned its potential meal when approached. But, the bird returned to get and eat the dead snake left in place once examined. Perhaps if I had put the snake back, the robin I observed would also have returned to finish killing and eating the snake (and I would have returned it had it been dead). The robins may just not be sufficiently interested in snakes to make certain they take their meal with them when approached.

This seems to be the only report of a Red-bellied Snake attacked by an American Robin. While answering a couple of questions, investigating this raised other questions. Had I not intervened, however, I would have been left with different questions.

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