Notes

Third Reported Nest of Solitary Sandpiper in Ontario

Jake Walker

On the morning of 10 June 2003, I found myself in a beautiful tract of mature forest just east of Wakami Lake Provincial Park in Sudbury District, near Chapleau, Ontario. I was conducting point counts on foot for the Boreal Forest Birds Project of Bird Studies Canada, and simultaneously gathering data for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. The day started well when two Gray Wolves (*Canis lupus*) made a brief appearance on the ATV trail I was following, apparent harbingers of good fortune. By the end of my first transect of six point counts, I had found three nesting species of birds: Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*), and Boreal Chickadee (*Poecile hudsonica*). I resumed hiking the ATV trail, heading south toward the starting point of my second transect. The trail became muddy shortly before the forest opened up at the edge of a large beaver pond, where I spotted an old nest in a dead tree. To my surprise, there was a Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) sitting on the nest.

The Solitary Sandpiper nest was located 3 m up in a dead Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*), standing in a metre of water. It was in atlas square 17LN76, and the specific location determined by GPS (NAD 83) was: UTM Zone 17; Easting 378182; Northing 5262221. The composition of the nest was mostly twigs covered with lichen, and it appeared to have been built by an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). The nest had definitely endured inclement weather, for it was tattered and beginning to fall from the tree in such a manner that the cup of the nest was on a plane nearly 45 degrees below horizontal. Despite the tilt of the nest in my direction, I was unable to see its contents because the adult never flushed, nor did it leave on a subsequent visit.

From the ATV trail facing east (toward the nest), there was a one-metre high beaver dam that had created a 200 m by 100 m pond. There were approximately 100 dead Black Spruce trees in the near side of the pond, one of which contained the Solitary Sandpiper nest. To the west, below the beaver dam, lay a dense Speckled Alder (*Alnus incana*) thicket. On either side of the pond, mature Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*) forest dominated the

hills, while Black Spruce grew in low wet areas.

Discussion

Of the world's 87 sandpipers, phalaropes and allies (Scolopacidae), only the Solitary Sandpiper, the Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*), and occasionally the Wood Sandpiper (*T. glareola*) lay their eggs in old tree nests of other birds, instead of on the ground (Moskoff 1995, Warnock and Warnock 2001). Solitary Sandpipers commonly utilize abandoned nests of American Robin, Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), and Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*).

Harris (1987) stated that the Solitary Sandpiper "probably nests throughout northern Ontario" from "south of the tree-line" to the "southern edge of the largely coniferous Timagami Forest section, just north of Sudbury". There have been various reports of downy young, females in breeding condition, and territorial behaviour in Ontario, but only two previous nest records (Schueler et al. 1974, Peck and James 1983, Tallman and Tallman 1986, Harris 1987). Typical nesting habitat consists of boreal forest near boggy ponds and lakes. The breeding biology of the Solitary Sandpiper is poorly known due to "the difficulty of gaining access to breeding habitat and finding nests" (Moskoff 1995).

The first confirmed Solitary Sandpiper nest in Ontario was discovered on 28 June 1964 in a Black Spruce forest on a hill above the southern end of Sutton Lake, Kenora District (Schueler et al. 1974, Peck and James 1983). It was the old nest of an American Robin, situated 2 m up in a 4.5-metre Black Spruce, against the trunk, and contained four eggs. Both the nest and the eggs were collected and deposited in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM #9479).

The second reported Ontario Solitary Sandpiper nest was located near a road about 60 m from the shore of Tobacco Lake (45° 51' N, 82° 27' W), Gordon Township, Manitoulin District (Peck 1995), a little south of the breeding range described by Harris (1987). The nest site was heavy second growth woods of White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*), Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), and Beaked Hazel (*Corylus cornuta*), with some Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) and White Spruce (*Picea glauca*). It was an old American Robin nest, at a height of 1.4 m in a small Balsam Fir, and contained four young when found on 17 June 1992 by Steve Hall and his son, Gordon. The adult Solitary Sandpiper put on a vigorous distraction display after two of the young flushed from the nest when it was approached by the observer's dogs.

Details of the third reported Ontario nesting of Solitary Sandpiper described in this note have been forwarded to the Ontario Nest Records Scheme.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ron Tozer for assistance with the literature and researching Solitary Sandpiper breeding behaviour and Ontario nest records. Details in the Ontario Nest Records Scheme concerning the second Ontario nest were kindly provided by Mark Peck of the Royal Ontario Museum.

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Lapland Longspur Feeding on "Hidden" Grains

Bill Crins

During migration, and in the shoulder seasons on the breeding grounds (late spring and early autumn), the Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) typically feeds on seeds, and particularly, although not exclusively, on the fruits of grasses and sedges (Williamson 1968a, 1968b; Custer and Pitelka 1978; West and Peyton 1980; Hussell and Montgomerie 2002). In most species of plants used as food by Lapland Longspurs, the fruits are visible and relatively easily accessible. In a study in the southern Yukon Territory, for example, over 77 percent of identifiable plant materials in the diet of migrating Lapland Longspurs consisted of Foxtail Barley (*Hordeum jubatum*), Canada Bluejoint (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), Tickle Grass (*Agrostis scabra*), Aquatic Sedge (*Carex aquatilis*), and other *Carex* species (West and Peyton 1980). All of these grasses and sedges have erect inflorescences with readily accessible fruits.

On 20 October 2002, Michael Runtz, Rory MacKay, Brad Steinberg and I were birding at an open old sawmill clearing and railway yard known as Odenback, at the west end of Radiant Lake in Algonquin Provincial Park, Nipissing District. A small group of Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) and Lapland Longspurs was present in the large clearing once occupied by the sawmill buildings. While attempting to get a better view of the longspurs, I focussed on one individual that was feeding actively in low-lying grasses. Upon close examination, I realized that this longspur was feeding on the fruits of Ensheathed Dropseed (*Sporobolus vaginiflorus*), a grass in which most or all of the inflorescence is enclosed within the uppermost leaf sheaths. The longspur was able to manipulate the plant with its bill and tongue in such a way that the overlapping leaf sheaths could be separated, and the enclosed grains eaten. Clearly, this longspur had solved the puzzle of extracting grains that were fully (and tightly) enclosed and not visible, since this bird fed only on this species of grass during my five-minute observation.

The ability of the Lapland Longspur to feed on Ensheathed Dropseed or any other grass with flowers that remain enclosed within the sheaths (and where self-fertilization takes place, a process called cleistogamy; Clayton and Renvoize 1986) raises some interesting questions. Are the cues visual, or is there an olfactory component? Do individual birds learn about potential

seed food sources from their parents? Ensheathed Dropseed does not occur within the breeding range of Lapland Longspur (Porsild 1957, Hultén 1968, Dore and McNeill 1980, Porsild and Cody 1980). These sources also indicate that there are few, if any, other grasses with ensheathed, cleistogamous flowers in its breeding range. Thus, it is highly unlikely that longspurs could gain experience feeding on such "hidden" sources of grains before migrating southward. There appears to be no published evidence of Lapland Longspurs using such grasses as food sources. So, questions remain about how seasonal granivores find and use food sources, especially cryptic ones.

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Turkey Vulture Nest Sites in Southeastern Ontario

Daniel F. Brunton

In his review of nesting by Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) in Ontario, Peck (2003) illustrated a rather spotty distribution for this species in southeastern Ontario. No breeding was reported for the City of Ottawa (former Region of Ottawa-Carleton), for example, and only a "sight record" is offered as evidence for adjacent Lanark County. The following documents such a nesting in Lanark County and draws attention to previous documentation of a City of Ottawa record.

Lanark County Nesting

A Lanark County nest of Turkey Vulture was examined on 28 June 1998 by K.J. Keddy, K.L. McIntosh and this writer on the Keddy property (45° 3.9' N, 76° 14.2' W) in Drummond Township, Lanark County, ca. 8 km southwest of Carleton Place. Like so many recent nests in southern Ontario and elsewhere in Canada (Peck 2003, Houston and Terry 2003), the nest was situated in a small, abandoned, wooden building (a hunt shack). This structure (Figure 1), however, is in an area of extensive deciduous forest with no sufficiently large canopy opening within at least 75-100 m to accommodate the take-off of a vulture. Adult birds likely would have accessed the structure from the nearest clearing along an overgrown cart track which runs by the building.

One large, downy chick was observed at the nest site, perched on the remains of a sleeping bench (Figure 2). P.A. Keddy (pers. comm.) photographed two comparably-sized young here the year before (June, 1997), and based on observations of adults in the vicinity, suspects that nesting occurred in years prior to that.

City of Ottawa Record

Allison and Allison (2001) reported and illustrated the nesting of Turkey Vultures in a rural landscape within the former City of Kanata. This nest was in an abandoned log building also, and was situated behind a fallen door amid the ruins of a staircase. Allison and Allison (2001) included a photograph, taken on 25 June 2000, of a single large, downy chick in the nest. Based on their discovery of a Turkey Vulture primary feather in the building a year earlier, they suspected this site was used for nesting in 1999 as well.

Turkey Vultures have been known to summer and presumably nest east of Ottawa on or about the

Figure 1: Entrance to Turkey Vulture nest site in abandoned hunt shack, 28 June 1998, Drummond Township, Lanark County. Photo by *Daniel F. Brunton*.

Figure 2: Turkey Vulture chick at nest site, 28 June 1998, Drummond Township, Lanark County. Photo by *Daniel F. Brunton*.

massive cliffs of the Eardley Escarpment (the southern face of the Canadian Shield), in western Quebec since at least the 1980s. That population is likely the source (or at least a major contributor) of breeding birds in adjacent southeastern Ontario.

Breeding status in Southeastern Ontario

Cadman (1987) and Peck (2003) described the Turkey Vulture as breeding across southern Ontario. The Turkey Vulture population in southeastern Ontario has increased tremendously in recent decades. What was once a rare sighting in the early 1980s has become an everyday event along major roadways in the Ottawa Valley. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see concentrations of 10 or more vultures (both adults and young) roosting or resting in dead trees or on fence posts along Highway 417 west of Ottawa in late summer and fall (pers. obs.). It seems reasonable to assume that nesting is occurring in this area on a regular basis now, despite the surprisingly inconspicuous nature of such activity by this large animal.

Given the frequency with which Turkey Vultures are seen in extreme southeastern Ontario along major highways such as Highways 416, 417 and 401, it is expected that the absence of nesting records noted in the former counties of Prescott, Stormont and Dundas (Peck 2003) does not reflect actual distribution gaps. Natural Turkey Vulture breeding habitat (extensive forest with large individual trees or cliffs and caves; Cadman 1987) is relatively rare in these areas, however. Accordingly, nesting will most likely be confirmed here in isolated, abandoned buildings as has been the case in adjacent areas of southeastern Ontario.

Acknowledgements

Paul Keddy and Kathy Keddy kindly provided access to the Lanark nest, a confirmational photograph of the 1997 nestlings, and information on the history of the landscape surrounding the site.

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Anting by Common Grackles

Paul D. Smith and Ron Tozer

At about 1840h on the evening of 30 July 2003, Paul Smith and his wife, Anna-Marie, watched a group of three adult and four young Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) that were busily picking something off the ground and then preening themselves, in an area no more than a few metres across on their front lawn in West Flamborough, Hamilton, Ontario. Eventually, there were 10 adult and seven young grackles all crowded into the same small area of lawn. About 15 minutes later, they were startled and all left, but within two minutes, four young and two adults returned. At 1904h, the four adults and five young that had gathered for the second time left for good.

The grackles seemed to work over their whole bodies, the undersurface and along the leading edge of the wings, along their sides, at the upper and lower base of their tails, on their backs and up on their breast and neck areas, as far as they could reach. They occasionally stopped to scratch about their heads or sides.

After the birds left, Smith inspected the area where they had been concentrated and found the ground covered with small, pale "red" ants, all with wings, and apparently preparing to swarm. They were spread over an oval-shaped area about 2 by 2.5 metres across. The density of the ants was estimated to be about 20 per decimetre squared. Smith collected a number of the ants and preserved them in alcohol.

Over the 12 years the Smiths have lived in West Flamborough, they have seen anting by Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), grackles, and American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) on three or four occasions, but never more than one or two birds at a time. The number of birds crowded into such a small area, and the amount of aggression between them, was surprising to them. Frequently, the adults would lunge at the young, and would often present the typical aggressive stance toward each other: bill pointed skyward; spread tail, wings and body plumage; and frequent "screeching" as they did. This was in marked contrast to their behaviour toward each other when they fed. The Smiths have an area of about 2 by 3 metres covered in flagstone on their side lawn where they spread cracked corn daily. This frequently attracted up to 20 or 30 grackles at a time. Here there was the occasional confrontation between adult males, but the young were just as likely to be fed by the adults as chased off.

It appeared to be near the peak of molting by these birds, as evidenced by the many grackle feathers scattered across the lawn, and it was tempting to speculate that the anting was somehow related to this. However, there were many other anthills sprinkled across the lawn, and the jays, judging by the feathers, were just as far into their molt as the grackles. It was a mystery as to why the grackles were the only species taking part in the anting, and why they were so concentrated and aggressive.

Discussion

According to *The Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (Terres 1980), over 200 species of birds (all passerines) have been known to practice anting, and 24 species of ants have been identified as having been utilized in this behaviour. However, Whitaker (1957) listed 16 non-passerine species that have been reported also to undertake anting. Common Grackles are among those species that have been reported previously in the anting literature (e.g., Brackbill 1948, Groskin 1950, Whitaker 1957).

Anting has been observed most often during August in North American birds, coinciding with "the seasonal molt and new feather growth", and it is presumed that it "does have possible effectiveness in soothing skin irritation" during that process (Terres 1980), apparently due to formic acid from the ants. It has been suggested also that anting probably would "kill or discourage ectoparasites" (Terres 1980), although Potter (1970) "found no positive evidence to support the theory that birds ant to soothe skin irritated by ectoparasites".

With respect to the aggressiveness exhibited by the grackles anting on the lawn, perhaps the concentration of ants in that one small area was a particularly attractive and scarce resource, causing the birds to compete vigorously and vociferously to gain access to it. Other bird species may have been discouraged from joining the aggressive grackle melee that ensued.

The ants were later identified as *Acanthomyops interjectus* (G. Umphrey, pers. comm.), a species previously reported to have been used by birds for anting (Whitaker 1957). The *Acanthomyops* genus of ants are "exclusively subterranean ants (that) are rarely found above ground except during the nuptial flight". They often can be identified by "the strong lemon verbena or citronella odor that is emitted as a defense chemical" (UNC 2004). These characteristics of the ants involved in this incident may have made them very attractive and infrequently available.

Acknowledgements

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