

Topic of Note

Natural Foods of Black-capped Chickadees

On 19 December 1985, Vicky Johnston and myself observed four Black-capped Chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*) foraging in a swampy area of Storrington Township, Frontenac County, about 18 km south of Westport, Ontario. The swamp was completely frozen over with about 30 cm of snow cover. The chickadees were seen perched on the heads of cattails (*Typha latifolia*) growing along the edge of the swamp against a roadway. They plucked the fluff from the cattail heads with their bills, then probed for and fed upon something within the heads. We assumed that the chickadees, being fond of insect larvae and eggs, were

feeding on the tiny larvae of the cattail moth (*Lymnaecia phragmitella*) of the family Cosmopterygidae, which feeds in the heads of cattails (Borror *et al.* 1976).

The same chickadees were also seen feeding on the fruits from the clusters of staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*) trees growing along the swamp edge.

Literature Cited

Borror, D.J., D.M. DeLong and C.A. Triplehorre. 1976. An introduction to the study of insects, 4th ed. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York. 852 pp.

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Winter Foods of Northern Cardinal, American Tree Sparrow and Pine Grosbeak in Southern Ontario

Observations of plant foods taken in winter by Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), American Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*) and Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola*

enucleator) were made at the Mabel Davis Conservation Area, Newmarket, York R.M. The 6.5 ha study area is described in Dance (1984). Observations were

made over 34.5 hours on 22 dates between 20 December 1985 and 9 February 1986. Plant material was collected and species identifications were confirmed in the lab.

The food items selected by each bird species and dates of observed consumption are listed in Table 1.

Northern Cardinals were observed cracking and ingesting riverbank grape seeds on four dates from early to mid-January. De Graaf and Witman (1979) and Martin *et al.* (1951) have noted consumption of wild grape by the Northern Cardinal.

American Tree Sparrows were observed consuming seeds of three species of goldenrod, two grass species, and catnip. Late

goldenrod, catnip, and Virginia wild rye were used on three occasions. I observed the use of gray goldenrod, zig zag goldenrod and meadow fescue on only one date.

In the United States, the American Tree Sparrow subsists almost entirely on weed and grass seed during the winter (Martin *et al.* 1951). Apparently this sparrow consumes a higher proportion of grass seed than do other fringillids (Bent 1968b). None of the sources checked by the author mentions catnip seeds as a winter food of the American Tree Sparrow. These sparrows returned to a 6 m patch of catnip on at least three dates over a 23 day period.

Table 1: Plant Food Consumed by Three Species of Winter Birds in Southern Ontario

FOOD PLANT

BIRD SPECIES	Common Name	Scientific Name	Date of Observation	Comments
Northern Cardinal	riverbank grape	<i>Vitis riparia</i>	Jan. 4, 1986	feeding on seeds
			Jan. 5, 1986	feeding on seeds
			Jan. 11, 1986	feeding on seeds
			Jan. 18, 1986	feeding on seeds
American Tree Sparrow	late goldenrod	<i>Solidago altissima</i>	Dec. 20, 1985	flock of 14
			Dec. 23, 1985	flock of 16
			Jan. 11, 1986	flock of 16
	catnip	<i>Cataria nepeta</i>	Dec. 21, 1985	flock of 11
			Dec. 23, 1985	flock of 16
			Jan. 12, 1986	fresh tracks in snow
			Dec. 23, 1985	flock of 6
	Virginia wild rye	<i>Elymus virginicus</i>	Jan. 11, 1986	flock of 16
			Jan. 12, 1986	4 birds
			Jan. 5, 1986	flock of 15
gray goldenrod	<i>Solidago nemoralis</i>	Jan. 5, 1986	flock of 15	
		Jan. 5, 1986	flock of 15	
		Jan. 18, 1986	flock of 10	
zig zag goldenrod	<i>Solidago flexicaulis</i>	Jan. 5, 1986	flock of 15	
		Jan. 18, 1986	flock of 10	
meadow fescue	<i>Festuca pratensis</i>	Jan. 18, 1986	flock of 10	
Pine Grosbeak	riverbank grape	<i>Vitis riparia</i>	Jan. 5, 1986	3 feeding on seeds
	American bitter-sweet	<i>Celastrus scandens</i>	Jan. 5, 1986	flock of 15

The winter food of the Pine Grosbeak is approximately 99.1 per cent vegetable material (Bent 1968a). Bent notes that wild grape seeds have been recorded as winter food by other observers. Literature reviewed by the author did not indicate previous instances of American bittersweet being consumed by the Pine Grosbeak.

Although good crops of highbush cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*), common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) and Manitoba maple (*Acer negundo*) fruits and seeds were available, I did not observe their consumption by any of the 15 bird species present on the study plot.

The author gratefully acknowledges that Tom Hilditch identified the plant specimens.

Literature Cited

- Bent, A. C.* 1968a. Life Histories of North American Cardinals, Grosbeaks, Buntings, Towhees, Finches, Sparrows, and Allies. Part 1. Dover Publications Inc., New York.
- Bent, A. C.* 1968b. Life Histories of North American Cardinals, Grosbeaks, Buntings, Towhees, Finches, Sparrows, and Allies. Part 2. Dover Publications Inc., New York.
- Dance, K. W.* 1984. Urban conservation area—floodplain and upland habitat. *Amer. Birds* 38:59-60.
- DeGraaf, R. M. and G. M. Witman.* 1979. Trees, Shrubs and Vines for Attracting Birds. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.
- Martin, A. C., H. S. Zim and A. L. Nelson.* 1951. American Wildlife and Plants. McGraw-Hill, Toronto.

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Book Reviews

The Encyclopedia of Birds. Edited by *C.M. Perrins and A.L.A. Middleton.* Facts on File Publications, New York. 445 + xxxi pages, \$49.95.

Editors or authors of Bird Encyclopedias set themselves a rather daunting task; by its very nature an Encyclopedia must be authoritative and a ready reference to hand, but in today's competitive world of ornithological publications it must be visually attractive

and entertaining. The editors of *The Encyclopedia of Birds* have, generally speaking, succeeded quite well in walking this tightrope between the twin pitfalls of excessive dryness and excessive popularisation.

Unlike (for example) Lands-