Notes

First Ontario Breeding Record for Eared Grebe

by
David H. Elder and Roger M. Simms

The Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) is essentially a western species in Canada, breeding west and south from central Manitoba (Godfrey 1986). In Ontario, it is regarded as a rare but regular vagrant in the spring and fall (James 1991). Eared Grebes have been noted in the Rainy River area of northwestern Ontario, primarily in the spring. Known records have been made exclusively on the sewage ponds of the towns of Rainy River and Emo. In early June of 1992, up to four pairs of Eared Grebes were present on the Rainy River sewage ponds. It appeared the birds might breed, but a sudden draining of the ponds for repairs ended that possibility.

On 11 May 1996, the authors observed an adult Eared Grebe in full breeding plumage on the Emo sewage ponds. A pair was noted by several observers in the same location on 23 May. In addition, a pair of Eared Grebes was present on the Rainy River ponds for several days during the same period. They subsequently disappeared. Glenn Coady advised the authors on 7 June 1996, that he had watched a pair of Eared Grebes on the Emo ponds a few days earlier engaged in courtship activities, and suggested that nesting was a possibility. That evening, Roger Simms visited the ponds at Emo and found an Eared Grebe sitting on a nest in the middle of the first pond. New emergent vegetation was just beginning to appear above the surface of the water in the pond, and the nest, a mound of soggy vegetation, was anchored to the edge of an old clump of cattails (*Typha* sp.). The nest was not hidden and could be easily seen from the edge of the pond. Again, on 14 June 1996, the authors saw an adult on the nest. There was no sign of the second adult, but vegetation on the pond was growing rapidly and it could well have been hidden therein.

One downy young with both adults was seen by Roger Simms on 22 June 1996, and two young with an adult on 30 June. The authors saw one nearly full grown immature (dark slate colour on the head, neck and back with a white throat, breast and face, similar to the adult non-breeding plumage) and one adult on 9 July 1996. Roger Simms saw two immature-plumaged birds on the lagoon on 18 August 1996, and no Eared Grebes were seen after this date.

While it was not possible to access the nest to record the number of eggs, at least one and probably two young Eared Grebes were raised. Thus, the first breeding record for the species in Ontario occurred (Dobos 1997).

Acknowledgements
Alan Wormington kindly provided the photograph used in this article.

Figure 1: Eared Grebes (adult and one young) on Emo sewage pond, 6 July 1996. Photo by *Alan Wormington*.

Editors' Note

David and Mary Elder found a pair of Eared Grebes nesting at Emo sewage ponds again on 29 May 1997 (Bain and Holder 1997).

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Use of *Anemone canadensis* in Rose-breasted Grosbeak Nests

by
Valerie E. Wyatt

The nest of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) is loosely built and usually constructed of twigs and lined with rootlets (Harrison 1975, Peck and James 1987). Less often, the nest exterior may contain plant fibres, stalks, grasses, pine needles and flower heads (Peck and James 1987). The nest often appears flimsy in that the eggs can often be viewed from below through the bottom of the nest. During a study of nesting productivity in Waterloo Region and Wellington County in 1996, 24 Rose-breasted Grosbeak nests were found in 14 woodlots. All nests were constructed primarily of small twigs; many of them also contained plant stalks that were forked and had small cone-shaped flower heads, which were visible from below, extending several centimetres out from the edge of the nest.

The plant stalks were subsequently identified as Canada Anemone (*Anemone canadensis*), a common native wayside species. This plant grows to a height of approximately 45 cm in large localized colonies on the edges of woods or roadsides (A. Anderson, pers. comm.). As the Canada Anemone blooms at the end of June, it is likely that Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were using dried stalks from the previous year for nest material.

Thirteen of the 24 nests contained Canada Anemone. Nests throughout the woodlots contained anemone stalks, regardless of the distance to the nearest woodlot edge where the plants were found. Canada Anemone was found in 6 (55%) of 11 nests located 0-25 m from woods' edge, 2 (50%) of 4 nests situated 26-50 m from woods' edge, and 3 (50%) of 6 nests that were more than 100 m from the nearest woodlot edge. Of the 13 nests containing Canada Anemone, 8 (62%) were successful, and 5 (38%) were predated. The success rate for all nests was 50% (12 of 24 nests).

It appears that Rose-breasted Grosbeaks travel to woods' edges or clearings to collect this plant. One possible reason is that the very slender but strong anemone stalks have several forks at right angles to one another which strengthen the nest structure without providing excessive bulk. The use of anemone stalks might contribute to the ability of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak to raise its young in such an apparently flimsy structure.

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Aggression of Hairy Woodpecker toward Northern Shrike

by
William J. Crins

Aggressive behaviour is frequent between individuals of the same species, and especially between males defending breeding territories (Terres 1982, Welty 1975). Interspecific aggression is illustrated in some well known cases, such as the attacks of Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) or Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrranus tyrranus*) on corvids and hawks, and the mobbing of predators by small passerines. However, cases of interspecific aggressive behaviour between species of roughly the same size are infrequently reported. Welty (1975) stated that "aggression rarely reaches the stage of overt attack but is more commonly expressed in ritualized postures, movements, or calls ("bluff") that serve to repel, intimidate, or appease enemies or competitors without the biological costs of actual combat".

Shrikes may elicit a defensive or aggressive response from other species, because they are predators of smaller birds. However, shrikes probably do not pose a serious threat to birds of the same or larger size. Thus, it was with interest that I watched a Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) attacking a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) for approximately one minute before the shrike departed. This occurred near the feeder at my house west of Huntsville, Ontario on 9 November 1995, at about 0730h. The woodpecker took several flights directly at the shrike, until the shrike flew away.

I have been unable to locate other reports of aggressive behaviour of Hairy Woodpeckers toward Northern Shrikes. However, Kilham (1983) noted that "no bird seems sharper or more alert in the winter than a Hairy Woodpecker". Both Kilham (1983) and Stokes (1979) commented on the aggressive territoriality of male Hairy Woodpeckers, with these birds sometimes attacking suddenly from hidden locations, and knocking each other from perches. Thus, the innate aggressive behaviour associated with territoriality may have been transferred, in this case, to an interspecific interaction with a perceived (but probably not real) threat.

Acknowledgements

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Unusual Nesting of the Hermit Thrush

by
Ron Tozer

During June, 1991 (date not recorded), Vonnie Heron discovered an active nest of the Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) at her home on the Big East River near Huntsville, Ontario (Lot 11, Concession 5, Chaffey Township, District Municipality of Muskoka). She examined the contents twice during the nesting (dates not recorded), once when the nest contained eggs, and later when three young fledged as her hand approached the nest. Due to its unusual situation, Mrs. Heron showed the nest to Bill Crins while it was still active, and to the author after the young had fledged.

Description

The nest was built on top of an old Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) nest (last active in 1990) which had been constructed on a nesting tray (at a height of 2.1 m) under the eave of a cottage building adjacent to Vonnie Heron's home (Figure 1). The cottage and home buildings are located in a small clearing (less than one acre) surrounded by mixed forest.

The nest itself was of fairly typical construction for this species, being a woven cup with a rather bulky, rough exterior composed of grasses, plant stalks and rootlets (Gross 1949, Harrison 1975, Peck and James 1987). The amount of vegetation which trailed below the main structure of the nest was apparently unusual for the Hermit Thrush, however (Figure 1).

Discussion

Hermit Thrush nests reported to the Ontario Nest Records Scheme (Peck and James 1987) were "usually placed on the ground (91 nests)". However, the species also nests in deciduous and coniferous shrubs and small trees, typically 1 to 1.5 m above the ground (Harrison 1975, Terres 1982, Godfrey 1986). Peck and James (1987) did not report any Ontario Hermit Thrush nests on buildings, or in old nests of other species.

There are a few published accounts of Hermit Thrushes nesting on buildings from elsewhere, however (Jones and Donovan 1996). A nest with young about 7 feet from the ground on a shelf under the eaves of an occupied camp porch was reported in Massachusetts (Forbush 1929). Another nest was in a tin gutter under the eaves of the second storey of a home in New Hampshire (DeMeritte 1920). Also, a Hermit Thrush was reported nesting on a rafter under the roof of a building of the University of Colorado Biological Station at Boulder (Johnston 1943).

The use of old nests of other bird species by the Hermit Thrush, although apparently extremely rare, is not totally unknown either. Gross (1949) reported that a pair of Hermit Thrushes "observed by John May was nesting in what appeared to be a typical robin's nest 2 feet up in a young hemlock". Another Hermit Thrush nest was

Figure 1: Hermit Thrush nest on tray over door. Photo by *Vonnie Heron*.

reported in an old Eastern Phoebe nest at a height of 2.45 m, without further details (Jones and Donovan 1996).

The Hermit Thrush nest described in this note is apparently the first reported in Ontario on a building, and in the old nest of another species. Details have been provided to the Ontario Nest Records Scheme.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Vonnie Heron for providing the photograph and her assistance in the study of this nest.

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Grackles Catching Fish

by
Jean Iron

On Sunday, 8 June 1997, Ron Pittaway and I took the new ferry from Toronto to Port Dalhousie to assess its fall pelagic prospects. We continued on the Niagara River extension to the "sand piles" at Queenston. Shortly after the ferry entered the Niagara River, we noticed Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscala*) flying out from shore over the water, sometimes halfway across the river and back. At the famous Niagara "fly-past" spot, we decided to study one grackle as it made its sortie straight out over the river. About 100 metres off shore, it hovered about two to three metres above the water in tern-like fashion for several seconds. Then it flew down, scooped something silvery out of the river and, with the item dangling from its bill, flew directly to an area of shrubs and trees on the shore. We determined the silvery item to be a small fish or minnow that the grackle was possibly taking to its young.

As we travelled, we saw about 25 Common Grackles fishing over the river and returning to shore with a shiny fish in their bills. On examining the surface of the water we saw many stunned or dead minnows being carried along by the current. Because we were downstream from Sir Adam Beck Generating Station, we thought the fish may have died or been stunned as a result of going through the turbines.

A search of the literature revealed that grackles feeding on fish is well documented and that fish can be part of the diet of grackle nestlings. Follett (1957) describes grackles fishing for River Emerald Shiners (*Notropis atherinoides atherinoides*): "On June 18, 1944, at Niagara Falls, Ontario, opposite the American Falls, thousands of slender fish approximately three inches in length formed dense shoals near the surface of the clear water. An occasional dead or dying fish, its white belly turned upward, floated conspicuously at the surface. The shoals were concentrated chiefly below a rocky point and in an eddy at the boat landing. Several Bronzed Grackles walked about on numerous small bits of driftwood floating in the eddy. As I watched, a grackle seized one of the slender fish and flew off, the bright silver body of the fish hanging from the bird's beak." On the Cayuga Lakes, New York, Hamilton (1951) observed that Common Grackles salvaged dead alewives (*Alosa pseudoharengus*) along the shores and fed them to their nestlings.

Grackles also take live fish. In Michigan, Beeton and Wells (1957) reported a female Common Grackle taking seven live Lake Emerald Shiners (*Notropis atherinoides acutus*) and carrying them to the same tree. Not one was eaten by the adult. "One of the minnows was seen wriggling in the bird's beak, and there seems no

doubt that the other minnows were alive also, since no dead ones could be seen floating on the surface. . . The bird flew back and forth eight to ten feet above the water, then upon sighting the minnow it dipped down, hovered immediately above the fish and captured it with a quick thrust of the beak. The grackle appeared to be very adept at catching the minnows; it was not observed to miss a capture and got only its breast feathers wet during the procedure." This method of catching fish was similar to the one we observed the grackles use on the Niagara River.

In *The Birds of North America*, Peer and Bollinger (1997) state that fish may be an important dietary item of Common Grackles living near large bodies of water and that to capture its prey, the Common Grackle "wades into shallow water (or hovers above the water) and captures live fish with its bill".

In conclusion, Common Grackles are opportunistic feeders that will take advantage of an available food source. They are skilled at fishing for live and dead fish. It will be interesting to look in other locations for Common Grackles using this feeding behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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An Evening with Paul Lehman

A special presentation featuring "Migrant Hotspots of North America" by Paul Lehman, and "Identification of Longspurs" by Jon Dunn, will be held at 7 p.m. on Monday, 24 November 1997, at the Civic Garden Centre, Edwards Gardens, Toronto. This program is sponsored by the Toronto Ornithological Club, Birders Journal, and Ontario Field Ornithologists. A registration form will be in October's OFO NEWS.