

Notes

Snow Bathing Proves Fatal For An American Goldfinch

by
Al Sandilands

Early on the morning of 30 December 1989, I observed an American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) flopping around in the snow of our yard. This behaviour continued for over a minute, and I assumed that the bird was injured. When it sat up normally and then flew away, I realized that it had been bathing in the snow. Its actions were similar to Method 1 of water bathing as described by Slessers (1970).

Snow bathing appears to be a relatively rare behaviour of birds. In the six winters that a feeder has been maintained at this site, it has been visited daily by 20 to 80 goldfinches, and snow bathing was only observed on this one date. Furness and Peterson (1987) reported snow bathing and construction of snow burrows by Common Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea*). Bathing in this instance occurred simultaneously by two dozen redpolls out of a flock of about 150. Clement (1968) reported one other incidence of redpolls snow bathing. Hooper (1984, 1986) reported snow bathing by Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*), a Boreal Chickadee (*Parus hudsonicus*) and House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), and Hopkins (1987, 1989) observed ravens and an American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) snow bathing.

There are numerous accounts of passerine birds burrowing in snow, and McNicholl (1987) gave a good summary of records. This usually occurs during harsh weather, with birds attempting to escape the elements or find food under the snow. Species most frequently recorded burrowing are American Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*), Common Redpoll (Cade 1953), Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*), and Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). Winter bathing in open water is also a relatively frequent occurrence (Slessers 1970, Welty 1982, Ehrlich *et al.* 1988).

The above records, however, were the only ones I could find on snow bathing. The smaller passerines bath by flapping their wings and rolling about in the snow as if it were water. The corvids flatten themselves in the snow and plough through it, propelling themselves with their wings.

Later that afternoon, another, or possibly the same, goldfinch was seen snow bathing in the same spot. As I was watching through binoculars, an American Crow that was under the feeder suddenly flew the 15 m to the goldfinch and pounced on it as it flapped in the snow. The crow landed

on it with its feet and immediately killed it with its beak. After pecking at the goldfinch for about 15 seconds, the crow flew with it to a tree about 30 m away and completely consumed it in approximately eight minutes.

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A.P. Sandilands, Gore & Storrie Limited, 73 Water St. N., Cambridge,
Ontario N1R 7L6

Photo Quiz

by
Doug McRae

Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds* 10 (1): **Northern Mockingbird**.

This Northern Mockingbird should not present too many problems, unless you were looking for a trick. The most diagnostic feature -- the white wing patch -- is clearly visible in this photo and eliminates most other possibilities. Shrikes, which also show a similar wing patch, would have a much heavier bill and stronger black masks.

Had the wing patch been hidden, there are still some other features visible which could be helpful in identifying this bird. The white outer tail feathers are easily seen in this shot from below, and the thin pointed bill can also be seen.

There is nothing in this photograph to give a sense of relative scale and this can throw an observer off from time to time. To my eye, this bird appears smaller than a Mockingbird should and, because the