Notes

Unusual Nestings of the Winter Wren

by
Ron Tozer

The Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) has an extensive range in the "Northern Hemisphere of both the New and Old Worlds" (Godfrey 1986). In North America, it typically nests in a hidden cavity within the earthy upturned roots of a fallen tree, under rotted stumps or tree roots, in mossy hummocks or in rocky crevices (Harrison 1975, Terres 1982, Godfrey 1986). This note reports on Winter Wren nestings which involve the use of buildings, in marked contrast to the normal situation reported for this species.

On 26 July 1987, Don Beauprie showed me an active Winter Wren nest containing at least three large young, located in a small woodshed behind his leasehold cottage on Cache Lake in Algonquin Provincial Park (Canisbay Township, Nipissing District). The nest was built in the space between a beam and the roof of the woodshed, and was the typical bulky mass of twigs, grass and mosses, lined with hair and feathers (Harrison 1975). Access to the building was gained through various openings. The site was in a mature mixed forest of Sugar Maple, Eastern Hemlock, American Beech, White Birch, White Spruce, and Balsam Fir, bordering Cache Lake.

On 17 June 1995, Don Beauprie again reported finding a Winter Wren nest at Cache Lake, this time located on the cottage itself! The nest appeared to be abandoned, although apparently not due to human disturbance, since the cottage was unoccupied prior to the nest discovery. The nest had been built above a window between the rafters of the overhanging roof (which provided shelter from above), and was supported on the outward side by a shutter on the window. Again, the nest was of typical construction, and contained large quantities of *Sphagnum* moss which had apparently been collected from the only nearby source, a large pot of moss in which sundew (*Drosera* sp.) was being grown.

The nest held five cold eggs (with another broken egg on the ground below) when I collected it on 1 July 1995. It was located 2.1 m above the ground, and measured as follows: outside diameter 12.0 cm, inside diameter 5.5 cm, outside depth 5.5 cm, and inside depth 3.0 cm. Apart from being somwhat vertically compressed due to the available space, the nest was of normal size for this species (Peck and James 1987). Nest data were deposited in the Ontario Nest Records Scheme.

Remarkably, an additional, partially constructed Winter Wren nest (comprised entirely of *Spagnum* moss) was discovered at this same Cache Lake cottage site in the fall of 1995 (Don Beauprie, pers. comm.). It was located in a sand-sifting box that was hanging on the outside wall of a small shed behind the cottage.

Discussion

Peck and James (1987) reported on 26 Winter Wren nests in the Ontario Nest Records Scheme, and all but one were in typical locations (e.g., fallen tree roots, holes in tree stumps and fallen logs, under a bank in a ditch, in moss on a rock, and on a rock ledge). The one exception was situated "under live birch roots growing under a building", but even that nest was not directly associated with the structure. A literature search yielded only one account of a Winter Wren nest in North America that involved a building. In 1874, Baird, Brewer and Ridgway reported a Winter Wren nest "built in an unoccupied log-hut, among the fir-leaves and mosses in a crevice between the logs" that had been found by William F. Hall in Maine (cited in Bent 1948).

The fact that the highly unusual Winter Wren nests associated with buildings in Algonquin Park were found at the same location is also noteworthy. Could the same male and/or female have been involved in both years? Clapp (1976) cited a banded Winter Wren in Holland that lived to five years and nine months as a longevity record for this species. The nests at Cache Lake were eight years apart, and hence there seems very little chance of either member of the original pair surviving that long. However, the 1987 nest did fledge young, and so a descendant of that pair (with the inclination to use buildings for nesting) could possibly have been involved in 1995.

Finally, the Winter Wren commonly utilizes buildings as nest sites in Europe (Cramp 1988), even though this habit is apparently so rare in North America.

Acknowledgements

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An Unusual Warbling Vireo Nest and Egg

by
Ross D. James

On 31 May 1995, I watched a female Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) gathering nesting material along the banks of the Beaver River, about 2 km northeast of Sunderland, Durham Regional Municipality. She appeared to be gathering nest lining, among the grasses and sedges close to the ground. Accompanied by the male, she flew to a nest in a row of scattered Silver Maples (*Acer saccharinum*) along the bank. The nest was fairly typically placed, about 5 m high, on a small side branch off a main upright trunk, near the centre of the tree, about two-thirds the total tree height.

I visited the nest again on 14 June and found only a single egg in the nest. This seemed to have been a long time to finish the nest and begin laying, but the egg appeared fresh. I also noted that the egg appeared to be longer and thinner than usual for this species.

I returned to check the nest contents just over a week later on 22 June, and was surprised to find only the same single egg in the nest. The birds were present and agitated, and the egg was warm. However, it was obviously infertile, being as clear and pinky white looking as a fresh egg. The female had obviously been incubating for almost two weeks already, a single egg that would never hatch. I collected the nest and egg (ROM #509606), relieving them of a futile pursuit.

The nest was typical of Warbling Vireos in size and shape. What was somewhat unusual is that the birds had used small Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) feathers in the construction. The geese are numerous along the river and feathers easy to find. Although the use of a few feathers in nest lining has previously been reported in Ontario, their use in the main part of the nest has not (Peck and James 1987). Bent (1950) notes one nest with feathers from the eastern U.S.A. The Sunderland nest had at least a dozen feathers about 3 to 4 cm long visible on the outside of the main body of the nest, as well as eight visible in the lining.

Even more unusual was the single egg. It measured 21.5 mm x 11.2 mm. This is 1.2 mm longer than the longest and 2 mm narrower than the narrowest extremes of a sample of 50 eggs measured by Bent (1950).

While only speculation, it is likely that this was the first egg ever laid in the first nest built by this female. Among domestic chickens, the first egg laid is likely to be the most atypical, being abnormally long and narrow; as more eggs are laid, the eggs become progressively rounder toward the normal shape (Romanoff and Romanoff 1949).

Warbling Vireos will ordinarily renest in a new nest after the loss of a nest. However, this pair moved from the area after the nest was taken, and I was not able to see whether she produced more normal eggs and a larger clutch in a subsequent nest.

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Yellow Rail in Mersea Township, Essex County

by

Alan J. Ryff

My first encounter with a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) in the lower Great Lakes happened on the sunny day of 11 October 1995. About 1230 h, I was walking across a field located 1.6 km southeast of Leamington in Mersea Township, Essex County. The field lies between County Road 33 and Sturgeon Creek, the major drainage system to the northwest of Point Pelee National Park. The entire field was dry on account of the unseasonably low rainfall. I was searching for migrant sparrows, in particular Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*). As I crossed a stretch of tall grass, a Yellow Rail flew up before me. With weak wing beats and dangling legs, it flew just above the grass for about 30 m and then dropped back into the grass. Its secondaries immediately caught my eye; they were white. Otherwise, the upper surface of the wings - as well as the upper surface of the body, head and neck - appeared black. This darker coloration indicates first basic plumage. Adult plumage is lighter due to the broad tawny margins on the feathers of the back, tertials, and scapulars (Ripley 1977). The bill was shorter than the head. The overall size of this rail was obviously smaller than that of a Sora (*Porzana carolina*). Yet its body was stockier and its wings were longer than those of a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).

I decided not to approach where the Yellow Rail had landed lest I disturb it. At about 1630 h, I showed Alan Wormington the location of the Yellow Rail, but we failed to flush it. However, Wormington (pers. comm.) flushed it on 12 October.

Without a tractor or a bird dog, the Yellow Rail is exceedingly difficult to observe or flush (personal experience in Michigan, New Jersey, Florida and Texas). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Yellow Rail "is among the most infrequently encountered of all the birds known to breed" in Ontario (Cadman et al. 1987). There are only four or five records of Yellow Rail in the Point Pelee area (Alan Wormington, pers. comm.).

Nevertheless, migrating Yellow Rails probably have regular stop-over sites along the north shore of Lake Erie. The migrants would take shelter in deep grass having an abundance of food,

where they would fatten up before continuing their southward flight, which could cross 80 to 150 km of Lake Erie, depending on the direction taken.

The above Yellow Rail flew out of a large patch of Canada Blue-joint grass (*Calamagrostis canadensis*). A native species, Canada Blue-joint grows in wet places (Dore and McNeill 1980). It is abundant in the boreal forest (Dore and McNeill 1980) and grows in the supratidal meadow-marshes along the coast of James Bay (Riley and McKay 1980). This coastland is part of the Yellow Rail's breeding stronghold in Ontario (Cadman et al. 1987). The range of Canada Blue-joint extends southward to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario (Dore and McNeill 1980). Thus, the migrating rails of the Hudson Bay Lowlands would find a familiar refuge in the Canada Blue-joint of southern Ontario. Also, Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) was growing along the margins of the above patch of Canada Blue-joint. In Ontario, the range of this moisture-loving species coincides with that of Canada Blue-joint (Dore and McNeill 1980).

Most likely, if birders searched patches of Canada Blue-joint and Reed Canary Grass, especially near Lake Erie in October, the number of records of Yellow Rail would rise sharply.

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Remembering Roger Tory Peterson

by

Jim Wilson

In the early sixties, while President of the Detroit Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society, I was able to attend the latter society's conventions in Seattle and Milwaukee. There, with the customary dignitaries, the familiar Roger Tory Peterson was always in evidence. I can remember to my surprise when getting on an elevator in Milwaukee, Mr. Peterson was the sole occupant; and how, in my awestricken state, I could only muster a muffled "hello" for the man who had made birdwatching such an enjoyable hobby for thousands, including me. In his field guides, by using an arrow or two to point out the salient features of the bird in his illustration, he made bird identification easy for beginners. At the time I wanted to thank him, yet hesitated to approach this quiet, reserved, withdrawn-looking man.

Several years later, that opportunity arose once more when it was agreed the members of the Rare Bird Committee of Point Pelee National Park would act as hosts to conduct Roger, and his attractive wife, Virginia, to some of Pelee's interesting birding locations. (Virginia did the range maps in the back of his field guide that was to be published later.) At the designated time, with the CBC film and sound crews at the ready, I found my young son, Jim, and I were the only ones present to walk with the Petersons and his several hundred admirers. At the outset as we walked the Nature Trail towards the tip of the Point, I became aware of his excellent "ear" for birds. Ahead of us, on the narrow trail, a distant Cerulean Warbler sang which caused him to come back to me to ask if many Ceruleans came through Pelee on spring migration. I answered that we always received a few, "just like the one you heard up the trail just a second ago". We had a friendly, little chuckle over that incident.

After the walk through the woods, the famous "sparrow field", and the Point, we paused where our guest autographed field guides. Not only his "own" received his signature, but also many of Chandler Robbins' field guide, "Birds of North America", that was very popular at the time. He signed these amicably, and to my delight, at the end, didn't hesitate to place his name on the flaps of several cigarette packages. This was when any feelings of awe that I had possessed for him those many years disappeared, for here I saw a regular fellow like the other birdwatchers I knew.

Near Hillman's Marsh, in a water-filled ditch where we were observing one of the rails, page 275 of "Robbins Field Guide" floated on the still water, where, at the top of the page, an illustration of the brilliant Hooded Warbler gazed up at us. Naturally, a few minutes of jovial buffoonery ensued among those present before our departure from this spot!

A sumptuous lunch followed our long morning of birding, yet the last minute or two will always remain with me when Roger Peterson told me I was one of the best at identifying birds by song with whom he had been birding recently. Thus, if I become completely deaf to bird sound some day, I can always cherish that compliment from the "Great Birdman"!

One last thought on this famous, gentle man occurs whenever anyone looks reluctantly through my ancient, scratched telescope. I jokingly chide them, "Don't scoff at that old thing! Roger Tory Peterson once looked through there!"

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Northern Shrike Kills Bird Over Water

by

Bruce M. Di Labio

On 11 November 1995, while birding at Prince Edward Point, Prince Edward County, I observed (through my Kowa scope) a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) approximately 200 m offshore chasing a small passerine, probably a redpoll (*Carduelis* sp.). The pursuit lasted a few minutes, with the small bird attempting every maneuver possible to evade the shrike. Unfortunately for the small, tiring bird, the shrike maintained its attack. At least two attempts were made by the shrike to capture the bird. The first was unsuccessful and the redpoll escaped, but on the second attempt the shrike grabbed the bird with its bill and feet simultaneously. At first the redpoll flapped frantically in an attempt to escape, but within seconds the small bird ceased to move and the shrike changed direction, flying towards Timber Island with the redpoll secured in its feet.

Based on Cade (1967), shrikes have rarely been reported hunting over a body of water. Typically during migration and on the wintering grounds, shrikes hunt small rodents over open fields or pursue small birds at feeders. One wonders if this shrike's hunting method was a learned behaviour to be repeated or a chance occurrence.

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Recognizable Forms

This regular feature will appear again in the December issue of *Ontario Birds*.