

Notes

Co-operative Flock Feeding by Waterbirds

David H. Elder

On 29 May 2005, I observed a large feeding flock of waterbirds moving along the shore of Windy Bay in the southeast corner of Lake of the Woods, Rainy River District, Ontario (Figure 1). The flock consisted of American White Pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*), Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*).

I have seen similar large feeding flocks in the same area in the past but this one was very close to the shore. I was surprised by the noise generated by the feeding birds—not vocal, but a steady dull roar created by the activities of the birds taking off, landing, swimming and diving as the flock slowly rolled



Figure 1: A mixed species feeding flock of American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, Ring-billed Gulls and Common Terns on Lake of the Woods, Rainy River District, 29 May 2005. Photo by *David H. Elder*.

forward. Pelicans and cormorants, finding themselves at the back of the flock, would take off, fly over the body of the flock, land at the front and immediately begin diving and feeding. In this manner, the entire flock moved rather quickly along the shore of the bay. The gulls and terns circled over the flock, dropping to the surface or diving into the water to catch small fish. The cormorants fished by diving and pursuing fish underwater. The pelicans fed by swimming forward, opening their huge bills and plunging them and their heads and necks down into the water. I saw several pelicans then lift their bills upward almost vertically and swallow something that was too small to make a bulge in their pouches but was likely a small fish.

As I watched the flock move along, two questions came to mind. Were the birds following a large school of small fish, the birds in front keeping track of its movements, or were the birds feeding on scattered small fish disturbed by all the activity generated by the flock as it moved along? The flock was likely formed when a few birds discovered some fish and started to feed. Their activities would catch the attention of other birds that would fly in to participate and in turn attract even more birds.

Certainly there appeared to be definite co-operation and co-ordination between the cormorants and the pelicans. The cormorants by diving and chasing fish underwater



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would cause some fish to flee upward where they could be reached by the pelicans plunging their bills, heads and necks into the water. The gulls and terns just took opportunistic advantage of all the activity to pick off frightened fish that came near the surface. The flock rolled along rather quickly and was a cohesive unit when it rounded a small point of land and could not be seen. The flock contained at least 500 birds, a rough estimate based on the number counted on the surface and an estimate of those underwater at any time.

Discussion

Double-crested Cormorants (Bartholomew 1942, Palmer 1962,

Glanville 1992, Hatch and Weseloh 1999) and American White Pelicans (Palmer 1962, Evans and Knopf 1993) regularly exhibit co-ordinated and co-operative foraging flock behaviour. In addition, these cormorants and pelicans plus other birds have been reported in mixed species foraging flocks (Evans and Knopf 1993). American White

Pelicans are observed to commonly steal prey from neighbouring birds in multi-species flocks, especially from Double-crested Cormorants (Evans and Knopf 1993).

Acknowledgements

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Hermit Thrush Preys on Snake

Seabrooke Leckie

This spring I was seasonally employed by the Pelee Island Bird Observatory (PIBO) to assist with migration monitoring on Pelee Island, Essex County, Ontario. During the regular capture program on 30 April 2006, I flushed a bird from the ground near the trail while en route to check the mist nets. The bird, a Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), flew across my path and into the net I was approaching. Upon reaching the net, I discovered that the thrush had been disturbed partway through a meal. Hanging from its mouth was approximately 8 cm of the tail of a small snake, apparently a DeKay's Brownsnake (*Storeria dekayi*). I removed the bird carefully from the net and placed it in a cloth bag to bring back for banding. All measurements were taken quickly and the bird released. Unfortunately, no photograph was obtained as I was initially concerned about letting the thrush return to ingesting its meal.

Discussion

The DeKay's Brownsnake is one of the more common snake species on Pelee Island, as it is elsewhere in Ontario (Meleg and Tiessen 1996). It is the smallest snake species documented on the island either currently or historically, as the Red-bellied Snake (*S. occipitamaculata*)

does not occur there (Kamstra et al. 1995). Given the time of year, it is unlikely that the snake was the young of a larger species.

Jones and Donovan (1996) reported the Hermit Thrush diet to include insects, other small invertebrates, fruit, amphibians (frogs and salamanders), and reptiles (snakes). They cited a single reference (Robbins 1990) for snakes in an appendix summarizing animal and plant species consumed by the Hermit Thrush. That occurrence was in Florence County, Wisconsin, and involved an adult Hermit Thrush bringing a freshly-killed 8-inch (about 20 cm) Red-bellied Snake to a nest, and two nestlings attempting to swallow the snake, starting from opposite ends (Throne 1941). Although the frequency of vertebrate consumption by the Hermit Thrush is not discussed by Jones and Donovan (1996), the small number of reported instances suggests such events are very rarely observed.

American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) have been reported to take snakes, fish and shrews rarely, but only four references were listed for snakes by Sallabanks and James (1999) in *The Birds of North America*. Additionally, Dan Derbyshire (pers. comm.), coordinator of the Tommy Thompson Park

Bird Research Station on the Toronto waterfront, reported observing an American Robin capture and kill a DeKay's Brownsnake in the park during June 2005.

A review of other thrush species accounts in *The Birds of North America* indicated there are relatively few reports of them taking vertebrate prey. Shrews, salamanders, tree frogs and snakes have been noted as occasional foods of the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*; Gowaty and Plissner 1998). The Veery (*C. fuscescens*) was stated to sometimes eat small frogs and salamanders, with only one source cited (Moskoff 1995), and the Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) was indicated to take some small salamanders occasionally (Roth et al. 1996). Vertebrate prey items were

not listed for Swainson's Thrush (*C. ustulatus*; Evans Mack and Yong 2000), Gray-cheeked Thrush (*C. minimus*; Lowther et al. 2001) or Bicknell's Thrush (*C. bicknelli*; Rimmer et al. 2001).

My conclusion is that while there is evidence that thrushes will take vertebrates occasionally, it is mostly limited to small amphibians such as salamanders. The occurrence of snakes in the diet of any thrush in eastern North America appears to be rare, especially for the smaller *Catharus* thrushes.

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