

Notes

American Robin Nest Supported by Cattails

Doug Tozer

On 21 May 2001, while wading through a large cattail (*Typha* sp.) marsh (about 600 ha in area) along the Beaver River northeast of Uxbridge, Durham (44° 07' N, 79° 03' W), I happened upon an agitated male American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). I immediately sus-



Figure 1: American Robin nest in cattails, with vegetation moved for viewing, 28 May 2001. Photo by Doug Tozer.

pected that a nest might be nearby and searched likely sites, which consisted of stumps and other dead snags that would provide sturdy support for the nest structure. My search failed to reveal a nest, yet the robin continued giving agitated alarm calls. Soon after I considered abandoning my search, I observed a female robin fly from a dense clump of cattails not far from the agitated male. Examination of that clump uncovered an American Robin nest containing 3 eggs. The same nest was examined once more on 28 May 2001, when it was found to have been depredated, as indicated by egg shells and damage to the nest structure and lining (Figure 1). The identity of the nest predator was unclear.

The nest was well-concealed, 1 m above the water surface within a dense clump of cattail, 150 m from the nearest shoreline. Only seven dead snags were visible above the vegetation within a 100 m radius of the nest site. All of the snags were greater than 4 m tall and were used by the male robin as perching sites. The water depth directly below the nest was 35 cm, and four measurements taken 5 m from the nest in each of the cardinal directions

yielded a mean of 76.8 cm. The nest was of typical construction for this species, having an outer wall of dead cattail and dead grass with a bowl of mud towards the interior. The lining was made of dead grass and the base of the nest contained moss. The nest was supported entirely by surrounding cattail stalks, in a manner similar to nests of the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) in wetlands (Beletsky 1996). The nest dimensions were: inner diameter, 10.2 cm; outer diameter, 15.1 cm; inner height, 6.9 cm; and outer height, 14.3 cm.

Discussion

The American Robin builds its nest in a wide variety of habitats and

locations (Tyler 1949; Harrison 1975, 1979; Sallabanks and James 1999), but typically avoids dense woodlands, favouring open areas such as fields and clearings around buildings (Peck and James 1987, Baicich and Harrison 1997). Nests are most often placed in trees or shrubs and on man-made structures such as under the eaves of buildings and on horizontal beams under bridges (Peck and James 1987) where there is firm support for the nest (Sallabanks and James 1999). Robins also nest in wetlands, especially ones that contain dead tree snags or stumps which offer nest support (Peck and James 1987). Therefore, what makes the nest described in this note unusual is not that the nest was located in a large, open wetland, but that the nest was placed within and was supported entirely by cattails, with no sturdy support below such as a stump or fallen log. A search of the literature and of nest finding guides failed to show any previous records of this species where the nest was supported entirely by cattail. All previously reported wetland nests appear to have been placed on stumps, fallen logs or within cavities of dead snags or similar situations.

Given that the American Robin is a habitat generalist, feeding and nesting in a wide variety of habitats (Ehrlich et al. 1988), it is perhaps not surprising that the pair attempted to nest at the location described in this note. The water level within Reach Marsh where



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the nest was located was lower in 2001 than in most previous years (pers. obs.), which likely exposed more mud in the vicinity of the nest site than is typical. Exposed mud might have made the nesting location more attractive for robins in 2001 than in more typical years when water levels are higher (Ron Tozer, pers. comm.). Indeed, during the 2001 breeding season, I noted several open patches of mud within the marsh which might have provided suitable feeding areas, initially attracting the robins to the marsh.

This note describes an atypical nesting of the American Robin. Although this species is known to

nest within wetlands, it characteristically chooses nest sites that provide firm support from below. The nest site described here is unusual because the nest was supported entirely by cattails and no firm support was present below the nest. This note illustrates yet another example of the flexible nesting and habitat requirements of this species.

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Doug Tozer, Watershed Ecosystems Graduate Studies Program, Environmental Science Centre, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7B8