

HEAD-BOBBING BEHAVIOR IN MALE FLICKERS

by Mary Dickinson Bird and James E. Bird, Boston

Agonistic displays among Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) are known to occur frequently during territory acquisition and courtship and may involve either or both sexes (Bent 1939; Stokes 1979). Some recrudescence of this behavior has been observed at other periods as well, including the final week of incubation (Lawrence 1967) and the early stages of migration (Bent 1939; Stokes 1979).

An incident of pre-migratory aggression between two adult male flickers was observed on Sunday, 16 October 1983, shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon. The two flickers, whose loud calls had been heard for some minutes before the birds appeared, flew from the west and alighted in a twelve-foot chokeberry tree located on a levee near Musquashicut Pond, North Scituate, Massachusetts. (This levee runs WSW perpendicular to the pond, extending from Hatherly Road into a marsh known historically as the "Guzzle." It is heavily overgrown with bayberry and poison ivy, a food source for flickers and other birds in the area.) Although the tree was still in foliage, the birds, perched in dead branches on the northeast face of the tree, were clearly visible to observers positioned approximately thirty feet to the south.

The flickers faced each other, separated by no more than twelve inches, with one bird stationed 45 degrees higher than the other. Almost immediately upon assuming these positions, the two birds commenced a simultaneous head-bobbing display. As the bird in superior position leaned forward pointing its bill, the individual in inferior position withdrew. The action was thereupon reversed, with the lower bird extending forward and the higher one withdrawing. This paired sequence of head-bobs was repeated in rapid succession four to six times within a few seconds. There followed a quiescent period of approximately twenty seconds in duration, after which the entire process was repeated several times. No tail or wing movements accompanied the display. The high number of head-bobs performed by both birds during each sequence exceeds that reported by Short (1971), who states that head-bobs rarely occur more than twice within a sequence.

During one of the first quiescent phases, the flicker in inferior position called softly, a short throaty note often associated with intensely threatening displays and believed to serve an appeasement function (Short, 1971). The same individual also frequently sat with its bill directed away from the other bird during the motionless periods.

In the final quiescent phase, the bird in superior position pecked once at a dead branch. A short head-bobbing sequence ensued, after which the same bird defecated. Immediately, both birds plummeted down into the lowest foliage of the

tree. Although the flickers were no longer visible, there were continuous fluttering noises for approximately fifteen seconds. One bird then flew rapidly to the southeast, disappearing into woodland approximately three hundred yards distant. The other bird flew up to the top of the tree's dead branches, called loudly four or five times, then flew west and disappeared from view, though its call continued to be heard for some seconds afterward.

The entire interaction occurred over a period of approximately seven minutes.

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