THAT VILLAIN AGAIN: THE COMMON GRACKLE

Vince Yurkunas' account of a grackle carrying off a House Sparrow reminded me of a scene I witnessed some years ago. According to my journal, on June 26, 1981, at 8:00 A.M. while visiting Great Meadows Wildlife Refuge, I heard a young Rose-breasted Grosbeak cheeping very loudly and continuously. (I had heard it doing the same thing, though more persistently, a few days earlier.) I could not see it at first among the leaves but suddenly got a glimpse of a black bird jabbing down with its beak, and a baby bird fell to the ground. It was still breathing but had been stabbed in the throat and side of the head. Its eyes were closed when I picked it up. My attention was called upward again as I heard a very loud "chink," the usual grosbeak call, but much louder and given about once a second or perhaps faster. In looking for the bird, my binoculars picked up a Red-eyed Vireo and then a grackle which was wiping its bill on a branch. I moved the baby bird I had found away from the path a few feet to a wooded area and went off. When I returned about twenty minutes later, the baby was dead, and no other birds were around. When I talked to a friend later about this, he said that he had passed the same place the day before. At that time, there were two young, and the adult female was giving a loud call. Six or more birds were drawn to the area. He did not mention whether a grackle was among them, and he saw no aggressive acts.

Another friend told me of a grackle that came to her backyard in June 1984 and over a period of days killed ten or so birds, both young and adults, eating only the heart and brains and leaving the rest. The situation was so disturbing that her young daughter didn't want to play outside. No wonder!

Betty Porter, Concord

MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF BABY WRENS

We have had a wren bird house on our cedar clothesline post for about twenty years. Every year we look forward to hearing their cheery song about the middle of May. In 1986, they were heard in the area, but no wren came to our box until early in June. We watched them diving in and out with wisps of straw as usual. In the second week of July, I watched the wrens removing pieces of egg shells and thought they must be very neat. Then, a few days later one bird was singing vigorously all day. I checked the area about 7:30 P.M. and found four baby wrens on the ground too weak to fly, although they did have feathers. The parent wrens paid no attention to them at this point, and when I checked again in the morning, the babies were still there but had expired.

This experience called to mind a similar event last year. At that time, the small birds that we found abandoned on the ground didn't even have feathers. House Sparrows do bother the wrens, but are usually driven off by the adults. Also, the hole is very small -- just wren size. It's a mystery how the young birds get out of the box before they can fly. Does the parent wren push them out for some reason and then refuse to feed them? And why?

Barbara R. Hoglund, Winchester

Editor's Note: On page 1029 of *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John Terres (Knopf, 1980), there is a reference to a 1969 paper (by L. F. Kibler) that demonstrated that the young of House Wrens may die in the nest when heavily infested with the blood-sucking larvae of a bluebottle fly *Protocalliphora.* Carl Welty (*The Life of Birds*, Knopf, 1963, page 356) notes that *Protocalliphora*-infestation occurs in about 47 percent of House Wren nests. The Terres' account also reports, "When population of house wrens is highest and competition for territories keen, some males may puncture eggs or kill young ... which may be one of natural forms of population regulation." Also, it is not uncommon among birds (and other animals, for that matter) for young that lag behind in development or are otherwise ailing to be neglected or ousted from the nest. The remains of deceased young birds will be removed from the nest by parent birds, like eggshells or other debris, as part of the instinctive drive to maintain a clean nest (see Welty, page 333). D.R.A.

LOVE THAT SUET!

About 10 A.M. on January 28, 1987, I noticed a female Northern Harrier trying to reach suet in a hanging holder outside my kitchen window. Her wings were held fully extended with the tail fanned as she tried to get a grip on the holder. She finally held onto a branch with one foot while the other leg hung straight down. She tried to get her bill through the openings in the wire holder, but without success. She then flew to a nearby dead pine tree and then again back to the suet. Just next to the beef suet holder, I had another type of feeder with a mixture of suet, corn meal, and peanut butter formed into a solid cylindrical cake. This was readily accessible, as the holder was open at the top. However, the harrier made no attempt to eat this.

At noon I saw the harrier again on the suet feeder, and this time it looked as though she had actually got a piece.

Edith Andrews, Nantucket

A BARN SWALLOW IS UNGLUED

An urgent call from a neighbor brought us to a young, goo-smeared Barn Swallow that had been discovered hanging upside down from a strip of flypaper in the horse barn. The swallow was bright-eyed but thoroughly glued together, staring up at us from a box. We hurried home, set up a small fan, and faced him into it while we rubbed him down with mineral spirits. (Luckily, the flypaper roll listed mineral oil as its main ingredient, and the spirits did the trick; the fan kept him from inhaling the solvent. When the glue had all been removed, we washed him with Dawn (the detergent of choice for oiled birds) and rinsed him under the tap. Then we rolled him in paper towels, gave him a dollop of Nutrical (a high-calorie veterinary food supplement), and left him to reflect on his strange short life thus far.

In the morning, he was ready for some June bugs, caught on the screens the night before. crickets and grasshoppers, moths and mealworms -- all disappeared, and still he was expectant. I dipped bits of steak in milk, then scrambled him an egg, and before long he was trying his wings. This intrigued my parakeet, Edie, who flew with him, then sidled up to him and preened his head feathers, warbling softly to him. They sat shoulder to shoulder and preened. The swallow was interested in Edie's yellow beak and pecked at it repeatedly. Edie was indulgent.

By evening, a change had come over the swallow. No longer sitting quietly in his cage, he bounced and flapped around, looking for a way out. All of the birds I have nursed are alike when ready to go. From calm resignation, they shift suddenly to the wild creatures they are. Their apparent tameness vanishes, and they lose all patience with makeshift cages and perching on fingers. The morning of the second day, I let him out of the cage to strengthen his wings. All day he ate and flew and chirped at the swallows outside. That afternoon, I gave him nine mealworms, put him in a box, and drove him to the place he had been found. No swallows were in sight. I opened the box, and he rose quickly above the treetops, circling and diving. Suddenly the air filled with Barn Swallows, swooping and chattering -- a convoy of support. It was a fine moment.

Julie Zickefoose, Hadlyme, Connecticut

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD AS REFEREE

Sunday, May 17, 1987, was a big day for spring migrants. Pat Comas and I met Bob Stymeist as we were looking for a Lincoln's Sparrow at Mt. Auburn Cemetery. As we paused briefly by the bridge at Spectacle Pond, I saw movement under a large rhododendron. Suddenly, two catbirds tumbled out of the bush onto the pavement. We thought at first that they were mating, but quickly realized they were fighting and quite viciously at that. They kept putting

out their legs to grip each other's chest or head as they twisted and turned over, wings flapping, beaks biting. A third catbird appeared, walking around about a foot away from the two combatants, looking very disinterested in what was going on. I had the feeling that "she" might be a female they were fighting over.

Suddenly, just as it seemed a gory death was about to occur, the fight was over. A Red-winged Blackbird had flown down from a nearby tree. He flew directly between the two fighting catbirds. The fight stopped immediately, and all three catbirds flew off, leaving the blackbird standing alone on the pavement for a few more moments. Had the fight annoyed him or the ruckus disturbed the peace of a beautiful day? Whatever the reason, it provided us with an interesting and happy ending to the angry situation we had been witnessing.

Sandy Selesky, Westford

EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS FALL HAWK WATCH

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW) will maintain a consecutive-day hawkwatch on the summit of Wachusett Mountain in Princeton from September 1 through October 12, continuing on weekends through November 22, if the number of volunteer observers permits. Help is especially needed for weekdays at Wachusett from September 21 through October 12, the peak period for Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks migration.

The EMHW will also conduct coordinated watches on five week-ends this fall: September 12-13, 19-20, 26-27, October 3-4, and 24-25. Volunteers are needed for sites throughout eastern Massachusetts on any and all of these ten dates. Special attention will be focused on inland sites on September 12, 13, 19, and 20, prime Broad-wing migration time, and again on October 24 and 25, the best dates for large buteos and accipiters. Coastal sites will be emphasized on September 19, 20, 26, and 27, the peak period for small falcon and accipiter migration. Obviously, many volunteers are needed on the weekend of September 19 and 20.

Volunteers are needed to report the level of hawk migration activity from any site. Select a site near your home or contact the EMHW coordinator for recommendations as to the best sites where coverage is needed.

You don't have to be a hawk-identification expert to participate and report. Reporting the number of hawks seen is the critical requirement, not necessarily the identification. If you would like to learn more about hawk migration and identification, the EMHW coordinator can team you with a more experienced hawkwatcher at any of a number of sites across our region, from the Cape to the Connecticut River Valley.

If you wish to participate, contact Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155, or call 617-483-4263 after 8:00 P.M.

BIRD OBSERVER WORKSHOPS FOR FALL AND EARLY WINTER

FALL LOOK-ALIKES: Confusing Species Pairs OCTOBER 1987

Many North American bird species have "sibling" species or species counterparts that they closely resemble. Oftentimes these groups create identification problems for birders, especially in the fall. This workshop will focus on a variety of these puzzlers, and how to sort them out. Examples will include loons, female ducks, immature hawks, juvenile sandpipers, immature gulls, and a number of passerine species pairs. A field trip to a selected birding area will provide field experience to apply toward ideas presented in the lecture.

WINGS OVER THE WATER: Fall Coastal Migration NOVEMBER 1987

Thousands of waterbirds annually pass the Massachusetts coast during their passage southward to wintering areas in the southern United States and beyond. The contingent includes loons, grebes, gannets, cormorants, waterfowl, shorebirds, jaegers, gulls, terns, and alcids. Each of these groups has evolved specialized strategies and routes to successfully reach their winter destinations. This workshop will address the different aspects of fall waterbird migration as well as assist workshop participants in learning how to recognize some of these travelers. A field trip to areas where migrating waterbirds may be observed will provide an opportunity for direct experience with some of the notions presented in the lecture session.

QUABBIN AND ITS WINTER WILDLIFE: Winter Ecology JANUARY 1988

Because of its popularity last winter, the Quabbin workshop is being offered again. In this workshop details of some of Quabbin's more notable winter residents will illustrate how each is adapted to survive the rigors of winter. In addition to well-known inhabitants such as Bald Eagles, Wild Turkeys, Common Ravens, and Coyotes, some attention will also focus on less conspicuous forms of life that make this area so interesting, even in winter. A segment of the lecture will consider how wildlife faces winter, not only at Quabbin, but in New England in general. A field trip to the area will provide participants with a chance to explore the Quabbin wilderness on foot and to observe some of its more secretive residents.

Wayne R. Petersen will present all three workshops. Further details will be announced. If you have questions, please call 293-5262 (Hanover).