

HOARDING BEHAVIOR IN BLUE JAYS

While putting out peanuts in the shell for a tame squirrel (she climbs up the screen door and hangs upside down chattering until served and sometimes sits on my lap to eat), I noticed that the resident Blue Jays began to pick up the peanuts and carry them off. One October afternoon, a jay made over twenty trips to the back steps while I sat two feet away. This jay was recognizable due to a foot injury. It was presumed to be a female from observations of springtime mating behavior. The jay watched the squirrel bury a peanut in the ground. When the squirrel left, the Blue Jay dug up the nut and flew off with it. Another time, she watched from a tree as the squirrel took one nut to bury, leaving a second behind. The jay swooped down, claimed the second nut, and flew off with it. I have seen jays do this in one continuous motion.

An interesting behavior occurs if two or more peanuts are available. The Blue Jays will pick up one and then the other (unless able to carry both) carefully and repeatedly as if measuring the weight of each. This seems to be a careful decision-making process that indicates a complicated level of thinking. Robert Burton in *Bird Behavior* (Granada 1985) reports that before the southwestern Piñon Jay stores pine seeds, it "first tests the soundness of each seed by appearance, weight, and tapping it with its bill."

Peanuts in the shell have proven very popular with the jays. Even in a winter when the species was scarce, I had up to six to eight coming regularly to the back door. They usually come when I call to them with a "tee-a-dee" call. Some mornings, however, the birds perch in a Norway maple by the door and call or give a fly-past near the window. Once, when I responded to the "tee-a-dee" call, I discovered it was a mockingbird imitating. Another favorite is pizza crusts. Titmice also enjoy peanuts in the shell, and it is amusing to watch them struggle to carry a large-size peanut.

Do Blue Jays actually retrieve the nuts they hide? Unlike the chickadees who hide seeds near the source—even in pockets of clothes hanging on the clothesline, jays tend to be more secretive and go farther afield to store. I have not witnessed them finding stored food. But the Blue Jay's storing behavior was known to me in childhood when a pet jay belonging to my aunt and uncle was fond of storing table scraps around the house. More than once it flew into the children's bedroom with a spherical piece of Kix cereal and deposited it in a napping cousin's ear.

Dorothy Louise Case, Needham Heights

A TITMOUSE STAKES ITS CLAIM

One warm and sunny July day I was sitting on a lounge chair on my deck, camera propped on my lap, waiting to photograph the birds coming to our hanging bird feeder. I had also filled a small ceramic dish with sunflower seeds and placed it on the deck railing. Every now and then some of the House Finches, nuthatches, goldfinches and other regulars would be pushed off the feeder by more aggressive members of these species. The displaced birds would then go over and grab a seed from the dish. Some remained on the railing to eat the seeds, others flew off with seeds to a nearby tree.

A group of House Finches were eating together around the dish when a titmouse came by and chased them away. The titmouse then sat in the dish on top of the sunflower seeds and stayed there a minute or so, just looking at the seeds and glancing around. Then the bird moved lower in the dish, looking up and chattering out some call notes as if claiming the seeds. The titmouse continued to squat down lower and lower until finally it was lying prostrate over the contents of the dish. I took pictures as the bird went into each new position until the wings spread out over the edges and just the tip of the crest stuck up. The bird did not pick up or eat any of the seeds although it left twice and returned, each time landing in the dish again. The sounds from my camera seemed not to disturb it.

This behavior was interesting because even though this titmouse appeared to be claiming the dish of seeds, it never ate any or took any away. Since the titmouse assumed a position similar to that of a bird sunbathing, perhaps that is what it was doing and the dish of seeds made a comfortable "lounge chair." Or, maybe the seeds rubbed against its chest in a soothing manner as when a bird takes a dust bath. Whatever the reason, it made an unusual photo.

Sandy B. Selesky, Westford



LE CONTE'S SPARROW AT NEWBURY

February 4-20, 1989

The Le Conte's Sparrow of 1989, the eleventh record in the state, was flushed from the "knee-high weedy sector" of the fields to the south of Little's Lane in Newbury in the late afternoon of a very cold, sunny, breezy February day by a group of twelve birders. Among them were Wayne Petersen, who identified the sparrow, Rich Brown of New Jersey, Charles Duncan of Maine, Blair Nikula, and Simon Perkins. The following excerpts are from Petersen's field report.

As the group of observers spread out over the fields,...2-3 sparrows flushed nearby and then landed about 100' ahead. One caught my eye as being particularly small, and Brown noted that it looked yellowish....The bird landed in a small cherry tree....[where it remained]....for nearly 25 minutes, thus giving everyone superb views before it...dropped...into the dense growth near the base of the tree.

In general appearance, the bird was superficially like a Grasshopper Sparrow or even a brightly colored Savannah Sparrow. Most striking was a rich, buffy orange coloration about the face, lower throat, and upper breast, coupled with a prominent white median stripe on the crown. The sides of the upper breast and the sides and flanks were plainly marked with dark streaks. These failed to form a necklace as in Henslow's Sparrow. A broad, orange buff eyebrow stripe bordered a gray cheek patch but was not clearly bounded below as in the Sharp-tailed Sparrow. The nape was grayish violet with rich reddish streaks, somewhat suggestive of the Grasshopper Sparrow. The crown was blackish, and the white median stripe widened toward the back of the crown and appeared somewhat buffy in that region of the head. The back and scapular feathers were buffy with distinctive black centers. No wingbars were apparent, and the greater coverts appeared quite colorful, being rusty red in color. The bird's underparts were white below the richly colored upper breast, as well as in the belly area. The dark streaks on the sides and flanks were washed with the same orange buff as the upper breast. Only a faint suggestion of pale eyelids gave the bird a quite different look from the prominent eye ring shown by the Grasshopper Sparrow. The head shape was not as flat on top as a Grasshopper Sparrow, nor was the pinkish bill as large. The brownish, unnotched tail seemed slightly longer than that of a Grasshopper Sparrow. At no time did the bird make any audible sound.



Le Conte's Sparrow
Photo by Dr. Joseph F. Kenneally

Newbury, MA
February 18, 1989

The bird remained in the field at the end of Little's Lane in Newbury over two weeks (February 4-20), long enough to be photographed by several people and to be well seen by many.

Ammodramus leconteii occurs in the state as an irregular vagrant. Most appearances have been in the fall, chiefly October, with an occasional spring record. The earliest records of this species in Massachusetts include a bird at Truro October 19-22, 1969 (Clem, Bailey et al.), one at Eastham on November 18, 1970 (Kenneally), and a specimen collected at Manomet on September 4, 1971 (Museum of Comparative Zoology #330035).

Like its fellow congeners the Grasshopper, Henslow's, Sharp-tailed, and Seaside sparrows, Le Conte's is secretive, difficult to flush, and quickly settles out of sight in the grass. Because it produces only a brief, nondescript, buzzing or hissing, insectlike song, it is hard to find, to hear, and to observe. It tends to scurry mouselike through weedy tangles, giving the birder only brief glimpses through a cross-hatching of grasses. It is one of the smallest (five inches) of the sparrows. Its most striking features are well described in Petersen's report.

The habitat preferred by this species is wet grass or sedge meadows and the shrubby tangles and matted or tall rank grasses on the edges of marshes and bogs. During migration and in winter, these birds are found in weedy fields, as well as in areas of broomsedge or in cattails. Le Conte's Sparrows nest in the prairie marshes of Canada and north central United States and migrate regularly through the Great Plains east to the Mississippi Valley, irregularly through the Ohio Valley, and only "casually" to the east coast.

Dorothy R. Arvidson

COUNT THE NUMBERS

There is no denying the fact that many species of birds are much lower in numbers today than they were ten, or even five, years ago. And, other than the annual Christmas counts, scarcely any of the birders and trip leaders record on their daily field cards, except for the rarer birds, the numbers of the different species they see or hear. Because I have always done this, I can look back at my records of bird trips prior to World War II and note some interesting differences. For example, between forty-five and fifty Eastern Bluebirds were counted on almost every half-day trip to the Sudbury River Valley. In those halcyon days bluebirds were a common bird, but I still recorded the number of Eastern Bluebirds on each trip as best I could.

Unless this is recorded during the trip, it is hopeless to try to reconstruct numbers at the day's end. Two examples spring to mind. The first was a trip with friends during which we saw numerous American Kestrels. When we checked our lists after the trip, I asked, "Kestrels?" One person said four, another twenty. I said, "We had one on Pine Island Road, two in the common pastures, two going out toward Plum Island, and three migrating down the island, a total of eight. The other answers varied from "I guess you're right to "I don't remember all of those."

Another example was a May trip to Mount Auburn. We were only there about two hours, because we were headed for Newburyport thereafter. On the way out the gates, I asked, "How many Cape Mays?" The answers again ranged from "I haven't the foggiest" to "I think twelve." I said, "We had one opposite Mary Baker Eddy Pond in the tree where we sometimes have Orchard Orioles, two on Indian Ridge (I could still hear the first bird singing), and three more on the tree below the Dry Dell—a total of six."

Fellow birders, please start counting the numbers of each species that you see every field trip. Old coots like me won't be around forever. If others don't pick up the burden, no one will be able to supply answers to the questions such as "Are Wilson's Warblers more common this year than last? How do they stand compared to five years ago? Is there a real decline, and if so, how much?"

Believe me, as the days, weeks, months, and years go by, memories blur. Today, if I see or hear two Least Flycatchers a year, I am happy. Yet, I remember Ruth Emery telling me the story of the field trip her late husband Maurice went on with a group of birders, including Ludlow Griscom. This was a "lethal" tour, and Ruth reported that Maurice was terribly tired coming home. But the complaint he voiced was that all he could hear in his mind was, "Chebec, chebec, chebec, chebec."

Count those birds!

Henry T. Wiggin, Brookline