

UNUSUAL PREY ATTAINMENT
OF AN IMMATURE RED-TAILED HAWK

The fall passerine migration is typically quite good at Mothball Pines, Cisco, Nantucket. For four weeks during the month of September, Edith Andrews of Madaket, sponsored by the Maria Mitchell Association, conducts a banding program in the Pines. The object of the program is mainly to study fall passerine migratory patterns and relative bird population densities. Although 1991 did not have the great numbers experienced in previous years, it did have good species diversity and unusual sightings. Species highlights included Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Traill's Flycatcher (unknown species), Mourning Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Lincoln Sparrow, and Gray-checked Thrush. In addition, an unexpected visitor, a Red-tailed Hawk, "ran" the net lanes with the project volunteers.

This strikingly handsome hawk first appeared on Monday afternoon, September 2. It perched on a twelve-foot snag in close proximity to the net lane called "Edge 2." The bird was easily approachable, allowing members of the crew to photograph and study it at close range for several minutes. All the while, it seemed unconcerned with our presence. It was obvious that its well-warranted prejudice toward humans was not yet developed.

On Tuesday morning during the first check of the lanes for netted birds, a disturbance was noticed near the net lane called "Catbird 2." As another project volunteer (Max Leenhouts of Houston, Texas) and I came upon the scene, we saw the young hawk sitting near the bottom panel of the four-tiered mist net. The hawk was removing an entangled Gray Catbird from the net. Upon realizing we were present, the hawk flew off into the pines with its prey. Inspection of the net revealed that the hawk was able to remove the catbird without destroying the net meshing. This event caused much excitement at the banding table, prompting several volunteers to return to the encounter site to inspect the array of catbird feathers left behind by the retreating hawk. They returned to the banding table with what appeared to be a freshly disgorged pellet. The pellet was found directly at the site of the hawk's attack on the catbird. Evidently, the immature Red-tailed Hawk had spent some time examining the Gray Catbird in the net prior to dispatching it. It is likely that the hawk discarded the pellet during the period between when the net lanes were opened and the time of the first run. Over the next half hour I dissected the pellet to determine what our guest had been eating. To our surprise, I discovered the lower portion of a set of small passerine-sized legs!

The portions that I found included the heels, the tarsometatarsi, and the toes. Several distinct features indicated that these partial hindlimbs belonged to

none other than those of a Cape May Warbler. The diagnostic features and supporting evidence included booted tarsi where the topside of the toes was uniformly black and the underside was the bright yellow of a "yellow jacket" wasp. Also, on the previous days, several Cape May Warblers were banded, and one of the striking features we noticed was the uniqueness of the leg and foot colorations.

This leads to several possible theories as to how the hawk was able to capture what we presume was a Cape May Warbler. One theory is that the warbler was so exhausted by its night-time migration that it could not evade the hawk, thus allowing the raptor to capture and kill the warbler. A second possibility is that the Cape May had died, and the hawk was hungry enough to scavenge for carrion. A third theory is that the warbler was entangled in the mist net, and the hawk picked it out of the meshing.

Of the above three theories, I believe the third to be most plausible. It is possible that a different bird was consumed by the Red-tailed Hawk, but the supporting evidence suggests that it was a Cape May Warbler. Subsequent to the catbird event, the hawk was seen in the vicinity of another net lane called (coincidentally) "Cape May." Here it was attempting to dislodge and dispatch a Black-capped Chickadee. The hawk was scared away from the chickadee and from that point on, was discouraged by the volunteers from hunting near the net lanes. This discouragement served several purposes: it made the hawk "afraid" of humans, thus giving it a better chance of avoiding any aggressive human encounters; it saved (we are sure) the lives of some unsuspecting netted passerines; and it saved the bird from possibly destroying our nets and causing injury to itself. The hawk was last seen in the vicinity of the net lanes on September 14.

Steven Arena, North Easton, Massachusetts

CORMORANT AND CLAM

Some encounters of birds with clams or other pelecypods are apparently inconvenient, and may even lead to death. John Terres in his article on "Mollusks and Birds" in the *Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (1982, page 615) summarizes records for several shorebirds, a tern, rails, and kingfishers caught by the bill, and wading birds by the leg or foot. Here I report a clam firmly attached to a cormorant's bill.

On May 19, 1985, I watched from a boat near Middle Weepecket Island (in Buzzards Bay, near Woods Hole, Massachusetts) an adult Double-crested Cormorant with a hard-shelled clam around the tip of its lower mandible. The cormorant was standing on or near a nest among many other nesting cormorants. By comparing clam and bill-lengths on a photograph (kindly provided by

Whitney Robbins), I estimated the clam to be about fifty-five millimeters long. From the weights of a series of four clams with lengths fifty to seventy millimeters, I estimated the clam's weight as at least fifty-two grams. The cormorant's gaping bill and repeated lifting movements suggested that the clam was an inconveniently heavy load.

On the next day (May 20) I again approached the island by boat and later landed. I found no clam-bearing cormorant standing on the island, nor any dead bird or clam in the vicinity of the original sighting. Thus, I can say nothing about the final effect of the clam on the cormorant.

Cormorants usually feed only on fish, and this bird may have encountered the clam while seeking demersal prey, such as a rock eel (gunnel) or sand lance, which comprise a large part of the diet in this area.

Jeremy J. Hatch, Milton

WETLAND BIRD PROJECT

Observations are requested for the second year of a two-year study to research the habitat of wetland birds and to inventory the more secretive ones. Eleven species are being studied: Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Least Bittern, Green-backed Heron, Virginia Rail, Sora, King Rail, Clapper Rail, Common Moorhen, American Coot, and Common Snipe. If you observe the presence or breeding activities of these birds, please contact Dr. Scott Melvin, Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) Rare Species Zoologist, at NHESP, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Westboro, MA 01581 (508-792-7270).

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