

RED-TAILED HAWK AND DEAD CROW

As I walked with two friends from Halcyon Lake toward Auburn Lake at Mount Auburn Cemetery on Saturday, May 14, 1994, I heard the sound of mobbing crows. I turned to my friends, both novice birders, and told them that the crows may be screaming at some hawk or owl that they have located near the pond. We looked up as we got closer to Auburn Lake and saw several crows circling above the trees on the right side of the pond's bridge. We also saw several birders looking at one particular conifer with binoculars tilted up toward the center of the tree. There, sitting calmly and quietly, was a Red-tailed Hawk with a dead crow in its talons. It was on a branch inside the tree, but because of some open areas in the front of the tree we all had a clear view of it. It was not eating the crow, but just sat there looking up at the circling and screaming crows or down at the birders and photographers below.

After about fifteen minutes of sitting there among the screaming crows, the hawk took off across this side of the pond to another conifer about forty yards away. The crows followed and dive-bombed the hawk as it flew and then continued to circle and scream above this new tree. The hawk sat there for only about five minutes and then proceeded to fly across the pond again, back to the same branch of the first tree. However, this time, perhaps flustered by the attacking crows, it dropped the dead crow before landing, and the crow fell into the water. After another five minutes or so (while it kept looking down toward the dead crow in the water below), the hawk flew off with the crows fast behind. I was surprised that the hawk did not try to retrieve the crow from the water. I was also surprised that it never tried to eat the crow while sitting in the tree after first killing it. I had been in Harvard Square in Cambridge two years ago and had watched as a Red-tailed Hawk grabbed a pigeon in midflight and then carried it to a tree in the old church cemetery where it immediately proceeded to eat it as at least forty crows screamed and circled above and people watched from the street. For some reason, this Mount Auburn hawk just held its kill firmly in its grip without eating it. Maybe it intended to get it back to a nest and young? I had heard that a pair of Redtails had been building a nest earlier in the spring.

The most interesting part of this story for me, however, was the behavior of four Mallards and two Canada Geese swimming around in the water at the time all this was going on. They remained below the hawk as it sat in the tree during those fifteen minutes. When the hawk flew to the second tree at the other end of the pond, the ducks and geese all swam closer to that tree. And when the hawk flew back to the first tree, they followed once again and swam back to near

where it landed. It was like watching people at a tennis match—heads turning to follow the traveling ball. The waterfowl seemed extremely curious about the dead crow in the water after the hawk lost its grip on the crow. They kept swimming over to the dead crow, never touching it, but going right up close to it even after the hawk had flown away. After about ten minutes, they lost interest and ignored the crow. I would have thought that when the hawk first caught and killed the crow and landed in the tree that the ducks and geese would have flown as far from the scene as possible. However, perhaps they thought it was safer for them as long as they kept their eyes on the hawk and knew where it was at all times while it was at their pond. I just found their reaction to the hawk and the dead crow quite intriguing.

Sandy Selesky, Westford, Massachusetts

BREAKFAST WITH A HOODY

On March 1, 1994, I had the opportunity to watch a Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) feed on the Providence River in Rhode Island. Because of the extensive ice floe and freezeup of the river, the bird was forced to feed in a stretch of open water close to shore and thus provided me with an opportunity to observe its feeding behavior at close range.

In winter this species is chiefly found on freshwater bodies (S. L. Scott (ed.), 1983, *Field Guide to Birds of North America*, Washington, DC: National Geographic Society), although it can be found on coastal estuaries during the colder months. The Providence River supports a marine ecosystem and is located at the head of the Narragansett Bay estuary; technically, the river is considered a salt wedge. The lighter surface water has a low salinity of about five to fifteen parts per thousand (ppt), while the heavier water at the bottom is very saline with about 25 ppt. The river contains a variety of marine species including crustaceans and numerous fish, especially in the summer when menhaden, bluefish, and striped bass migrate up the river from the south.

My observations, made on March 1 at 10:00 AM, indicated that the adult male Hooded Merganser was feeding on mud crabs (*Eurytanoteus depressus*). Eight crabs were caught and eaten between 10:00 and 10:17. The merganser would flatten its crest each time prior to diving. When the bird rose to the surface with the crab in its serrated bill, it would move the crab around several times before actually swallowing it. Sometimes it dropped the crab but quickly recought it. The merganser caught three crabs in shallow water (two to five feet deep) and then headed for the deeper water that surrounded some wooden pilings. The next five crabs were taken in this deeper water. Apparently, according to published field research, the Hooded Merganser's main diet is fish, but they also eat many crustaceans, insects, some lower vertebrates, and

mollusks (Ehrlich, P., D. Dobkin, and D. Wheye, 1988, *The Birder's Handbook*, New York: Simon and Schuster).

After feeding, the bird climbed out on the edge of the ice and spent several minutes preening and sitting quietly. Numerous gulls, Buffleheads, and Red-breasted Mergansers flew by and landed in the same area but did not appear to interact with the Hooded Merganser.

Alan Strauss, Providence, Rhode Island



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