

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER: FIRST CONFIRMED BREEDING IN MASSACHUSETTS

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The first reported nesting of Red-bellied Woodpeckers (*Centurus carolinus*) in Massachusetts occurred on June 20, 1977, when Robert Edson of South Natick observed a pair of adults feeding suet to two juvenile birds in his backyard. Mr. Edson had been alerted to the rarity of this species and the possibility of its breeding locally through an information bulletin prepared by Leif J. Robinson and distributed in mid-May by Richard Lent. In the days that followed, the original sighting was confirmed (young photographed) by Eliot Taylor, Lent, and Robinson, all participants in the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas Project.

Shortly after the discovery of the Natick birds, an active nest of Red-bellied Woodpeckers was found in Adamsdale, Bristol County. The parent birds had been feeding on suet at the home of Mrs. Grace Crawford since at least February. All attempts at finding the nest proved unsuccessful until the discovery on July 3rd by Richard Forster and David Clapp.

Thus, the northeasternmost known breeding limit of Red-bellied Woodpeckers was established. If we follow the logic of John Bull (Birds of New York State, 1974), these pairs reflect the continuing range expansion of this species toward the northeast from the South Atlantic states. A detailed assessment of this expansion, as observed in Massachusetts during the past century, has been prepared by Robinson (to be published).

History of the South Natick Birds

From February, 1971, through June, a female Red-bellied Woodpecker was observed in South Natick by many birders. But not until January, 1974, was this species again reported from that town--only then was it learned that a Red-bellied Woodpecker had been regularly visiting the suet feeder of William Biggart. On February 2, 1974, Robinson discovered a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers near the Biggarts' property. In mid-December, 1974, Taylor was told by Mr. Biggart that possibly as many as three birds had been regularly visiting his feeder. A year later Mr. Biggart assured Taylor that there were three Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and plans were laid to establish confirmation of nesting.

The first contact from the information bulletin came about May 25, 1977, when Mr. Edson reported that Red-bellied Woodpeckers had come to his feeders for several years. (Mr. Edson lives about a quarter mile from the Biggarts and didn't know the birds were rare.) Less than a month later the confirmation was in hand.

Thus, in South Natick, it seems likely that Red-bellied Woodpeckers bred in 1975 and possibly as early as 1974. Yet, actual first nesting in Massachusetts may have occurred in 1972, when male and female birds occupied closely adjacent territory in the central part of the state. The male was seen in the Springfield-Longmeadow area from October, 1971, through April, 1972; the female in Agawam from January, 1972, through April, 1972 (records on file at Massachusetts Audubon Society).

History of the Adamsdale Birds

Mrs. Crawford originally reported the Red-Bellied Woodpeckers as a postscript to her report during the February Cardinal-Tufted Titmouse-Mockingbird Census. During the following months both male and female were reported frequenting the suet feeder. In June the behavior of the adult birds, especially the female, seemed to indicate that the birds had young. The female would arrive at the suet, remain for several minutes feeding, and then would fly off carrying a chunk of suet. The male was an infrequent visitor to the feeder at this time, and the duration of his stay was short. Despite this fairly conclusive behavior, the actual location of the nest remained a mystery.

Discovery of the Nest: Upon the arrival of Forster and Clapp on July 3rd, the female was feeding. Shortly thereafter she left carrying suet, and an attempt was made to find the nest. Due to the mature hardwoods (oak, beech), it was impossible to ascertain the direction in which she flew. After searching the area for several minutes with no results, it was decided to watch a field behind the house, hoping to observe the direction from which she flew in. After about half an hour the female appeared from a wooded area across the field and disappeared near the houses. As the observers were walking across the field, she flew overhead into the wooded area.

The wooded section was entered and a meandering stream followed until an extensive area of large red maples with many dead trees was reached. Armed with the knowledge that Red-bellied Woodpeckers were partial to river bottomlands, Forster and Clapp were certain that they were in the vicinity of the nest. After about five minutes they heard a Red-bellied call, and immediately the male came cruising through the woods and landed on a dead tree. Its bill was crammed with insects (grubs, beetles?). It disappeared into a hole, reappeared, then disappeared again finally reappearing with his bill empty. This routing was repeated twice more before the observers left the nest site.

Some Observations and Reflections

Careful observations of the young by Taylor on June 24th and Robinson on the 26th revealed both juvenile male and female. The former displayed dark crimson (Harvard style) on the forehead and a very vague pinkish spot on the nape; the latter exhibited a pink wash on the nape that was more widespread and stronger than the juvenile male's and a deep gray forehead without a trace of red. No down was evident on either of the young.

On June 24th Taylor noted that the juvenile male was feeding himself, though still being cared for by the adult male. By the 26th Robinson observed both young feeding alone, yet continuing to demand attention from the adult male. Aggressive behavior by the juvenile female was observed by Taylor as early as June 24th as she drove Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris) away from the suet feeders. On the 26th Robinson and Lent noted similar behavior by the adult male and the young. This behavior is especially interesting in light of Harrison's remarks (A Field Guide to Birds' Nests, 1975): "Common Starlings are aggressive competitors of Red-bellied Woodpeckers, often forcing them to abandon excavations after

completion." Curiously, the adult female was not seen between June 20th and 29th.

The dates on which the South Natick fledglings were first observed deserves mention, for it precedes by three days the earliest of the 44 breeding records cited by Bull for New York State through 1971.

While Forster and Clapp observed the Red-bellied Woodpeckers feeding the young in the nest, only the male arrived, each time carrying large insects in great quantity. He would disappear almost entirely into the hole, indicating that the young were at a fairly early stage of development. (Well-developed young often stick their heads out of the nest hole to be fed by the adults.)

Admonishments

Since the Red-bellied Woodpecker is quite sedentary, it can be expected any time of year. Therefore, it is requested that birders avoid the nesting areas from April through June. Playing a tape recording of the bird's vocalization at any time is unwise and during the breeding season it is stupid.

As a general policy, nesting species which represent pioneering efforts in our state are not widely broadcast. It requires only a slight disturbance to cause abandonment, especially while the birds are incubating. If these pioneering species are left unmolested to establish breeding populations, then in a decade's time we may be able to enjoy a healthy breeding population.

Acknowledgements

For their assistance in confirming the South Natick birds, Robinson would like to thank Richard Lent and Eliot Taylor for, respectively, doing the leg-work and for describing the history of the South Natick birds. He also thanks the birders who will seek the Red-bellied Woodpeckers with as much respect for creatures as for checklists.

THISTLE SHORTAGE

Embargo on thistle from India because it is being used for its oil content which in turn is being consumed as protein for human consumption. Food, and in particular protein, is very short in India so the government took these steps.

Previously most thistle came from Ethiopia but has declined in the last two years.

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