

PREDATION BY CICADA KILLER WASP

By Robert L. Pyle

September 5, 1963: A Cicada Killer wasp (Sphecius speciosus) was found entangled in our mist net, two inches from a Magnolia Warbler. The bird was alive but completely limp, and remained limp for about two hours after removal from the net, then finally died. There was no apparent cause of death, and the bird had not been badly or tightly entangled in the net. The wasp was shaken out from from the net at time of discovery, and it flew off.

September 9: Exactly the same story as on September 5, but this time it was a Cape May Warbler. The bird died while being removed. Again, the wasp was shaken free of the net, and it flew off.

September 10: Seven House Sparrows in the net. A Cicada Killer wasp was noticed hovering within one or two inches of one sparrow. When approached, it moved down the net to another sparrow. All birds removed, apparently O. K. They were held overnight and released the next morning, all apparently O. K.

September 13: A Cicada Killer hovering within inches of a Redstart in the net. The bird was limp and apparently paralyzed. It was still limp one hour and twenty minutes later. (The net had been checked less than 15 minutes prior to discovery of the bird.) About one hour and thirty minutes after removal, the bird suddenly became active and chipped frequently. It was then released, apparently fully recovered.

September 13: Several hours after the Redstart incident, a Cicada Killer was found entangled in the net within two inches of an Ovenbird. The bird was apparently O. K. It was held for 15 minutes and, still apparently O. K., it was banded and released. This time the wasp was not shaken free, but was very liberally doused with pesticide spray and died immediately.

We have not found Cicada Killers in or near the net before or since, nor have we had any such instances of unexplainably limp and paralyzed birds before or since. The circumstantial evidence is strong that this one individual Cicada Killer had become a new predator on the birds in our net. These wasps normally hunt out Cicadas, sting them, and carry them alive but paralyzed to a burrow where the wasp lays an egg on the limp insect and seals it in the burrow. The warblers were nearly twice as large as a Cicada, but, hanging in the net, perhaps the resemblance was strong enough to attract this individual wasp. I wonder if any other mist-netters have had a similar experience?

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