

Florida Field Nat. 26(2):44-45, 1998.

UNCOMMON BEHAVIORS OF RED-HEADED WOODPECKERS IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

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During a study of habitat use by Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) at Wekiwa Springs State Park, Orange County, Florida, we incidentally observed three uncommon Red-headed Woodpecker behaviors. Two events involved food items the species has not been recorded using in Florida, and one event involved the response of a Red-headed Woodpecker breeding pair to nest site alteration.

Unusual foods.—The Red-headed Woodpecker is omnivorous (Beal 1911). It has been reported to take the eggs or young of other birds (Iowa, Aldrich 1877; Colorado, Montana, New York, Bendire 1895; Georgia, Fontaine 1886; Ohio, Jones 1883; and Ontario, Canada, Morden 1889). Beal (1911) mentions that the Red-headed Woodpecker in Florida “enters poultry houses and sucks the eggs of domestic fowls,” but did not provide further details. However, in the most extensive foraging study of the Red-headed Woodpecker conducted in Florida during the breeding season, Venables and Collopy (1989) did not observe depredation of eggs or young by Red-headed Woodpeckers during 170 hours of scan sampling.

On 2 June 1996, in mesic pine flatwoods with a canopy of pond pine (*Pinus serotina*) and slash pine (*P. elliotii*) and a shrub layer of shiny lyonia (*Lyonia lucida*), gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), and saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), M. Belson observed an adult Red-headed Woodpecker perched atop a 3.6 m pine (*Pinus* sp.) snag that was 60 m from the woodpecker’s nest. The bird appeared excited and, after making a few tearing motions from something on top of the snag, flew from sight. M. Belson collected from the snag the remains (trachea, wings, and pygostyle) of a naked, recently-hatched bird that apparently had been eaten by the woodpecker.

Although the diet of the Red-headed Woodpecker is extremely varied, there are few records of Red-headed Woodpecker eating vertebrates other than young birds. Nauman (1932) reported a failed attack on a house mouse (*Mus domesticus* [*musculus*]) and Venables and Collopy (1989) the depredation of a “small lizard.” We observed a Red-headed Woodpecker handle a previously unreported vertebrate food item, the Florida worm lizard (*Amphisbaenia: Rhineura floridana*).

On 24 June 1997, in a sandhill longleaf pine (*P. palustris*) forest with a mid-story of turkey oak (*Quercus laevis*), small post oak (*Q. stellata*), and sand live oak (*Q. geminata*), and groundcover of wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*), M. Belson watched an adult Red-headed Woodpecker flycatch from a low, dead limb of a longleaf pine that was 10 m from the woodpecker’s nest snag. After each of several sallies, the woodpecker cached its prey in the dead limb. During one foray, the bird flew from sight and returned to the pine with somewhat labored flight and something worm-like in its bill. The woodpecker perched on the dead limb and attempted to cache the item, but it was placed perpendicular to the limb and fell to the ground after a few pecks. M. Belson collected the food item and identified it as a worm lizard.

The worm lizard was thoroughly desiccated and the body intact (TL = 28 cm), except for damage in the head region; the mandible was missing and the vertebral column was broken at two points within 3 cm of the head. The desiccation of the body suggests that the worm lizard had been killed at an earlier time. We do not know whether the woodpecker killed or scavenged the worm lizard.

Response to Nest Alteration.—Information on levels of parental investment in offspring by primary cavity nesting birds in natural cavities is limited. Venables and Collopy (1989) calculated that during the reproductive season, Red-headed Woodpeckers use 2.8% of daylight hours for feeding nestlings and 1.3% for cavity excavation. References to continued parental investment in a natural nest cavity that has been damaged or a cavity in a snag that has fallen are few. Brewster (1893) describes in great detail how a pair of Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) fledged young after their snag broke at the nest cavity entrance. There are several references to continued parental investment in nests located in nest boxes that fell to the ground; Carpenter (1992) and R. Dawson (pers. comm.) describe American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) and P. Lederle (pers. comm.) describes Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) demonstrating this behavior. The factors that govern whether a parent will continue to attend a damaged or altered nest cavity are not well understood.

In the sandhill habitat described above, a longleaf pine snag containing a Red-headed Woodpecker nest ignited during a prescribed fire on 17 May 1995. The snag fell that afternoon and landed with the cavity intact and the entrance accessible to the adults. A single bird visited the fallen cavity on multiple occasions. Assuming the nesting attempt had failed, P. Small removed the cavity face, revealing one infertile egg and two freshly hatched, living chicks. P. Small replaced the cavity face. An adult woodpecker visited the cavity numerous times the following day, and the chicks were alive and had full crops. On the fourth day, the chicks were dead in the cavity and covered with ants.

Acknowledgments.—This project has received support from the Florida Ornithological Society, Gopher Tortoise Council, and Citizens for Wekiva Basin GEOPark. We thank J. A. Jackson, W. K. Taylor, Rosi Mulholland, Christine Small, Kendra Panton, and Bruce Anderson for their comments. The suggestions of Danny Ingold, R. Todd Engstrom, and an anonymous reviewer are appreciated.

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