

EUROPEAN STARLING "HELPER" AT LATE SEASON RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER NEST

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The European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and the Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) are competitors for food (somewhat) and nest sites (primarily) (Stokes 1979, Wing 1956). The habits and behaviors that make them adversaries in nature, also mean they have similarities. This contradiction was demonstrated to me when I discovered an immature European Starling helping to feed a nestling Red-bellied Woodpecker. This occurred during August 1998 at LeFleur's Bluff State Park in Jackson, Mississippi, and was documented on video tape.

The first bird I saw at the willow tree nest cavity was a female Red-bellied Woodpecker on 1 August 1998. The nest was located in an excavated hole in a live black willow (*Salix nigra*) about 15 feet above ground. It was on the north-facing side of the tree where a major limb had broken off creating a large ragged area. There was a second hole located a little to the upper left (east). The area is bordered on the south by lawn then bottomland woods; on the north by pavement and baseball fields. For the few minutes that I observed, the female did not leave the nest, but called from the entrance. I made a note of this for my Breeding Bird Atlas.

On 9 August 1998, I returned to the tree and found an immature Starling, with a dull grayish-brown head and chest, brown wings and spotting on the belly. This bird entered the cavity with animal matter (grub/worm) inciting cheeping from inside. No other bird was nearby for the few minutes that I was there.

On 10 August 1998, fully curious now, I returned to the scene to find a male Red-bellied Woodpecker guarding above the nest hole. The Starling arrived with food, landing several feet from the woodpecker, which then began a chase sequence around the tree. The Starling finally managed to enter the cavity. I observed the Starling and the female Red-bellied Woodpecker alternately enter the cavity with food for the young. This activity continued until 14 August 1998. On this day, the

apparently single offspring was large enough to wait at the entrance of the cavity and call. When the starling approached, it would withdraw into the hole and cease calling. It would meet its parents at the entrance and immediately take the offered food. My last view of the Starling was when it poked its head into the nest hole and retreated without the food. It is unclear whether the food was eaten by the young woodpecker or dropped inside. During this and previous few days, there was minimal disturbance observed between the Starling and the parent woodpeckers.

On 23 August 1998, knowing that the woodpecker had left the nest, I went by to see if I could locate the family in the immediate area of the nest tree. What I found was rather unsettling. In the adjacent lawn area was a group of over 100 Starlings. Most, if not all, were immatures. Many were in the willow tree, especially on the large horizontal limb above the nest cavity. One Starling was inside the nest hole.

Observing the Starlings at the nest tree supported my theory on how the immature Starling came to be a "helper" at the woodpecker nest. I surmise that it accidentally came across this active nest while investigating future roost/nest sites. The altricial young, possibly with eyes still closed, responded to the intruder with gaping mouth and cries. Since feeding of young is one of the strongest impulses in birds (Skutch 1979), the Starling was stimulated to fill the gaping mouth of a bird in the "appropriate" location: a tree cavity. The urge to feed young is so strong that the Starling endured the harassment of the parents and diligently fed or attempted to feed the young woodpecker for at least six days.

Even though the two species are competitors, this means the Starling offers the appropriate food (animal matter) to the young. The video shows a grub in one case. Over a two-hour period on the afternoon of 14 August, the Starling approached the nest six times with food. I find it significant that although the young woodpecker was fed by, heard, saw and otherwise "knew" the Starling for much if not all of its young life, no parent association was applied toward the Starling. Interspecies helpers are well-documented in the bird world (Terres 1995). In addition, I recently heard from a fellow birder [Vic Duvic] of an instance where he witnessed immature Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) feeding fledged and begging House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*).

One final item of note: a resident Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) is seen on the video flying to the nest hole and hovering for a few seconds. The young woodpecker ducked back into the cavity and the shrike departed. Shrikes have been known to "steal" worms from robins. I wonder if the shrike was trying to get an easy

meal of rejected Starling-offered food, or was really investigating taking the young woodpecker itself.

Literature Cited

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