

A WHITETHROAT TRIO AND A WARBLER INCIDENT

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My experience in the summer of 1947 of observing two cases of strange birds feeding strange young may suggest that this behavior is not so uncommon. Perhaps it may even be permitted to go farther and say, that, given certain circumstances, it is quite likely to occur.

On May 7th, 1947 I trapped a male White-throated Sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis* (Gmelin), in mature plumage and banded him with a red band. This bird established territory in my study area at Pimisi Bay, just south of the Mattawa river in central Ontario, and he proceeded to announce this fact with a great deal of choice singing. On May 19th I caught another White-throated Sparrow in immature plumage, which proved to be a female, and I banded her with a green band. A couple of days later, May 24th, I caught a third White-throat, also in immature plumage, and this one was distinguished by a pink band.

By June 5th the fact that Red and Green were mated was no longer in doubt. On June 6th Green was collecting nesting material, but in spite of hours of search and watching I was never lucky enough to find the nest.

Meanwhile, on June 10th, I came upon Red and Pink in a hollow about 150 feet from the place where Green had been seen with her nesting material. The birds' behavior indicated that some kind of courtship was in progress. It was mostly on the part of Pink who, by now, I felt sure was a female. She hopped around the male and fluttered her wings. But there was no actual mating, at least not at this time. To find out what actually was going on between this interesting trio of birds, I caught and examined Green on June 17th. She had a large broodspot but no granulation. Shortly afterwards I caught and examined Pink and found that she showed no broodspot. A few days still later I once more caught and examined Green and then granulation was in evidence.

On July 7th the five young of Red and Green were out of the nest and scattered about in the underbrush. All three adult White-throats were in attendance. Pink was seen with food in the bill and she displayed the same anxiety about the young at my approach as Red and Green. The next day Red and Pink were again seen with the young, but Green was not present. On July 10th I saw Pink actually feeding the young together with their rightful parents. This was the last day Green was seen feeding the fledglings. After that she evidently took no notice of the family but made regular

short visits to the feeding place to snatch a few seeds in a hurry. I drew the conclusion that she was engaged in another nesting. As to Pink, I noted that on July 15th she, too, had ceased feeding the young, although she still followed the family now exclusively fed by the male. After this date Pink disappeared and was not seen again. Red and Green remained in the territory until they left for the south in the end of September. But there was no evidence that the second nesting had been successful.

Apparently Pink was an unmated, probably yearling, bird who arrived late and for lack of better opportunities joined company with the mated pair and without protest from their side was allowed to reside within their territory. I concluded she was a female on the grounds that the bird was never heard singing and a male would hardly have been tolerated by the mated male. The courtship display of the odd female was probably only a chance affair, though interesting, and apparently had no sequel. That she did not make a nesting attempt of her own nor helped the mated pair with incubation or brooding seems to be reasonably proved by the absence of broodspot. But when the young of the mated pair left the nest, and possibly before that, her latent maternal urge caused her to join in the care of them with a devotion even greater than that of their actual mother.

In a white pine above my house a pair of Myrtle Warblers, *Dendroica coronata* (Linnaeus), built a nest and hatched young. One day, while the Myrtle pair was absent, a female Blackburnian Warbler *Dendroica fusca* (Muller) came into the pine. This bird was known to be nesting in one of the adjacent trees. She meandered from branch to branch collecting food for her young and finally she happened along the branch of the Myrtle Warblers. When she came to the nest she stopped and looked down at the strange young, apparently in surprise, whereupon she resolutely fed them all the food she had in her bill. Evidently the young begged for more and the Blackburnian promptly collected several insects from the pine needles around the nest and fed the young twice more before she went on her way. A few minutes later the two Myrtle Warblers returned and the young were again fed by their proper parents.

In contrast to the White-throat, the Blackburnian Warbler was a mother bird who accidentally came upon the begging nestlings of another species and she immediately gave them the food she had collected for her own young and a little more for good measure. But in both birds alike, in the breeding as well as in the non-breeding female, the sight or proximity of young gaping for food, whether of their own or a kindred species, released the natural reaction of attending to their needs.

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