

BAT PREDATION BY THE ACORN WOODPECKER

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In July 2001 I observed predation on a bat (species unidentified) by an Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) at the Hopland Research and Extension Center in Mendocino County, California.

A population of Acorn Woodpeckers inhabits the small developed portion of the station along Parson's Creek, nesting in the large oaks. On 15 July 2001, Zebulon Young directed my attention to a hole in the door of a barn. The hole was approximately 5 cm in diameter and 2.5 m from the ground, in an area shaded by oaks most of the day. The door is made of two-by-four framework covered on both sides with plywood; the hole went through only the exterior layer of plywood, providing access to an otherwise sealed area of about 9 cm in width, 40 cm in breadth, and >2 m in depth. Young related that he had seen the woodpecker fly to this hole, reach in, pull out a bat with its beak, and fly with it into an overhanging oak tree. He pointed out the bird, high atop a thick horizontal oak branch. I could just see the head of the woodpecker rapidly appearing and disappearing from sight. The woodpecker appeared to be striking the branch on which it stood with its beak. The tap-tapping sound that usually accompanies this behavior was absent; instead, I heard a repeated call coming from the area of the woodpecker that sounded much like the high-pitched, relatively weak call of a bat. As I watched, several other woodpeckers flew to the immediate area, landing from 4 meters to less than 1 meter away, appearing to watch the activity with great interest. The closest of these engaged in repeated bobbing. Some or all of the woodpeckers were calling. As the struggle continued I eventually saw the flapping wing and a portion of the body of the woodpecker's prey, a small, dark, struggling bat.

Within two minutes the weak screeching had stopped, although the struggle appeared to continue for some minutes more. The woodpecker then flew to another branch, at which point I could plainly see the body of the bat held in the bird's beak. I lost sight of the woodpecker in the branches, but it soon reappeared, en route to a third branch. This time I noted that part of one of the bat's wings was missing. Three times more, the woodpecker flew to a different tree, or a different branch within the same tree. Each time I lost sight of it momentarily, and each time it reappeared with slightly less bat, until, bat wings entirely gone, it flew off some distance carrying just the body of the bat, and I lost the bird's trail entirely.

I could not identify the bat to species, but considering its size, dark hue, and records of species at the station, the most likely candidates include several species of *Myotis* and the Brazilian Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*).

It is possible that parts of this mammalian prey were being placed in storage: Walker (1952) and MacRoberts (1970) related that insect prey of the Acorn Woodpecker may be stored for extended periods in cracks or crevices.

Records of predation on vertebrates by Acorn Woodpeckers are sparse. Bryant (1921) observed a woodpecker eating the egg of a Western Wood-Pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*) near Yosemite Village. Mumme et. al. (1983) observed Acorn Woodpeckers eating their own eggs. Koenig et. al. (1995) noted that Acorn Woodpeckers have preyed on Western Fence Lizards (*Sceloporus occidentalis*). Koenig (pers. comm.) also mentions two unconfirmed observations in Carmel Valley, California, one of Acorn Woodpeckers dragging baby Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) from their nests, another of them pecking at a dead swallow nestling, but whether or not the babies were then consumed is unknown. Fajer et. al. (1987) recorded several attacks by Acorn Woodpeckers on a Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) colony in Stanford, California. The woodpeckers were observed to take eggs and at least one nestling, although the birds were not observed to eat either the eggs or the nestling.

NOTES

Shuford (1985) reported the mutilation of nestling Red-breasted Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) by an Acorn Woodpecker at Point Reyes National Seashore, California. He observed the woodpecker rip a piece of flesh from a nestling, but the bird flew off and was not observed eating the meat.

This is apparently the first observation of likely predation on a mammal by the Acorn Woodpecker. Observations suggest that the birds were not competing for a nest site, or acting to protect food stores, but rather using the bat as a source of food. At least rarely, Acorn Woodpeckers apparently consume a wide range of vertebrates, including lizards, nestling birds, and bats.

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