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RANDOM NOTES ON THE FEEDING HABITS OF SOME KENTUCKY BIRDS

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In reviewing my Kentucky field-notes I find a number of interesting records relating to feeding habits of various birds. The greater part of this material so well corresponds with published accounts of feeding habits that it is deemed best to prepare for the present paper mainly such notes as deal with unusual incidents connected with feeding habits, though some well known habits are mentioned. The observations, from which these notes result, were made principally about my home, at the time, Cherry Hill Farm, near Bardstown, Nelson County, Ky.

The notes deal with five species, namely: Red-bellied Woodpecker, Purple Finch, Cedar Waxwing, Tufted Titmouse, and Carolina Chickadee. No attempt is made to give a complete account of the feeding habits of these birds, nor are these notes intended to bear on the economic status of the birds under consideration.

Feeding habits of our birds are none to well known. By dissection the food of a bird may be ascertained, but it is for the field observer to learn the details of how birds secure their food, and to note their peculiarities and characteristics while feeding. Perhaps these random notes will stimulate others to make more detailed studies along this line.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER — *Centurus carolinus*

This species was one of the common resident birds about Bardstown. Being rather more noisy than other woodpeckers while feeding, its food habits were more frequently observed in the field than were the feeding habits of other members of its family. According to F. E. L. Beal, (Food of the Woodpeckers of the United States. Bulletin 37. Biological Survey.) a little more than two-thirds of the food of this bird consists of veg-

etable matter, and it is the smallest consumer of insects of the woodpeckers east of the Rocky Mountains.

The red-bellied woodpecker is a heavy feeder on beech and oak mast. In the early fall its incessant "cha-cha-cha" was a familiar sound in the beech woods about Cherry Hill. I never observed it in the act of storing beech mast though on numerous occasions red-bellied woodpeckers were seen carrying beechnuts to a considerable distance from the trees from which they were secured. Very likely many of these nuts were wedged in cracks or crevices for future use. However, in the fall of 1913, a red-belly was seen storing the acorns from a Chinquapin Oak (*Quercus acuminata*) which stood over the wood-pile at Cherry hill. The acorns were carried, one at a time, to fence posts ranging from twenty-five to three hundred yards distant from the oak tree, and were generally wedged in a crack in the post, usually near the top. One acorn was placed in a cavity caused by decay, and laid loosely on the rotten wood. As far as my observations went, but one acorn was deposited in a single post. Doubtlessly, the hoarding of mast by this bird is a common practice though it has received little attention from ornithological writers.

On May 4, 1920, I happened to notice a red-bellied woodpecker as it flew from the ground carrying the larger part of a walnut shell, which was taken to a large limb of a sugar maple. There the nutshell was held in its claws as the bird clung to the limb in true woodpecker fashion, and I could see that it was dipping its bill into the nutshell, evidently eating the kernel. A short time previous to this occurrence I had been cracking walnuts on the spot from which the woodpecker was seen to arise from the ground with the walnut shell between its mandibles. There was an abundant walnut crop in the autumn of 1920, the greater part of which remained on the ground in good shape until the following summer, a circumstance likely due to the mild winter. On April 26, 1921, a red-bellied woodpecker was seen to fly from a stump with part of a walnut shell and alight on a tree nearby. On approach it flew away out of sight, still carrying the nutshell between its mandibles. About fifteen minutes before this woodpecker was seen, I had been cracking walnuts near the stump on which I noticed the red-belly with the nut. Although these two incidents are hardly substantial evidence that the red-bellied woodpecker feeds on walnut kernels

under natural conditions they suggest the possibility of such a food habit. By wedging a walnut firmly in a crotch or crack, it seems possible that the red-bellied woodpecker would be able to drill through the shell and secure the kernel, but it is with considerable apprehension that I make this statement.

On the 2nd of March, 1917, snow covered the ground; while passing near the corner of my home my attention was attracted by a red-bellied woodpecker clambering over the outside of the building. The cause of its presence on the crib was quickly apparent. Pushing its bill between two boards it drew out a grain of corn, flew to a peach tree close by, and straightway made a meal of the kernel of corn. On another occasion, while working in the crib, a gentle tapping on the outside of the building was "spooks" until a harsh "cha-cha" announced the author of the mysterious knocking. At irregular intervals the tip of the woodpecker's bill appeared through the cracks between the boards, and finally it secured a grain of corn that lay on a part of the frame work of the building. It was frequently observed at the crib all through that same spring. During the exceptionally severe winter of 1917-18 a red-bellied woodpecker came frequently to my feeding station, but was so unpopular with the other birds that none of them would remain as long as the woodpecker was about. Crushed corn was eaten, though sparingly, and the bird kept up a continual outcry as if complaining for the want of something better.

Cherries both sweet and sour grew at Cherry Hill. In season both varieties were eaten by the red-bellied woodpecker, but the sour fruit seemed to be most relished. A tree standing in the corner of the garden farthest from the house, each year in the fruiting season, was more often visited by this species than any other cherry tree on the place. A fence post, directly under the branches of the tree, was invariably used as a "lunch counter," that is, on plucking a cherry, red-belly would drop to the top of this post to eat the fruit. All through the cherry season it was a common sight to see a red-bellied woodpecker, with a cherry between its mandibles, flying from toward the orchard to a woods a quarter of a mile distant. On May 17, 1921, I happened to notice a red-belly in a cherry tree that stood near the house. After a time it pulled a fruit and flew a short distance to a small dead sugar maple. The bird was not more than ten feet from the window through which I was observing its actions. I could see

plainly that it wedged the cherry behind a piece of loose bark and, bit by bit, devoured it. The actions of this bird clinging to the tree trunk, its tail pressed against the bark as it deliberately devoured the cherry, strongly suggested the movements of the yellow-bellied sapsucker in the act of extracting the sap from the holes which it drills for that purpose.

Throughout the summer the wild cherry (*Prunus serotina*) ripens and is an important element in the food of several species of birds at that season. In August both adult and young red-bellied woodpeckers fed on this wild-fruit which seldom failed at Cherry Hill.

On the morning of October 6th, 1916, while passing through the orchard, I observed a red-belly as it flew into an apple tree further on in the orchard. Approaching this tree rather cautiously, I came upon the woodpecker in the act of eating a hole in the side of an apple. For about two minutes the bird seemed unaware that it was under observation and continued to peck at the fruit. Then, as if realizing that it had been discovered, it suddenly flew off to the woods. Climbing the tree, I found that the apple on which it had been working bore a decayed spot near the stem and just at the edge of it, but entirely in the solid part of the apple, was a hole about half an inch across, and three-quarters deep. The bottom of this cavity contained several tiny holes, markings made by the woodpecker's mandibles. In the early winter, frequently, a red-belly would be seen feeding on an apple that remained on the tree, though decayed and practically dried up.

Although more common in the woods, the red-bellied woodpecker was not an uncommon bird in Bardstown, being frequently seen in street trees in the business section of the town. Possibly it will gradually become accustomed to the advances of civilization as its natural haunts are but slowly being destroyed in that locality.

PURPLE FINCH — *Carpodacus purpureus purpureus*

The purple finch occurred irregularly as a migrant in the Bardstown region. It was abundant in the winter of 1919-20, the only time that I found it at all common at that season. During that winter some few notes were made regarding its feeding habits which may be of interest.

On February 16, 1920, I observed a small flock of purple

finches in a cedar thicket and one individual was under observation for several minutes as it fed on the cedar berries (*Juniperus virginiana*). The skin was removed from the seed before the bird swallowed it, the skin dropping on the snow-covered ground below. The snow under the tree on which the purple finches were feeding was strewn with the small particles of skin of cedar berries. Red cedars were apparently as attractive to the purple finch in winter as were the blooming elms in the spring.

The first week of March, 1920, was cold and blustery with several inches of snow on the ground. On the 8th I passed through the cedar thickets that had furnished winter food for the purple finch but now the trees were entirely stripped of berries. In the underbrush at the foot of a hill sheltered by a beech woods, I found a flock of purple finches. I noticed, in the snow, signs of some bird having fed on the berries of the buck bush (*Symphoricarpos vulgaris*) and as I had never seen any bird feed on the berries of this bush I became much interested and remained nearby to learn, if possible, what bird it was. Soon several purple finches flew into the brush near me and two of them alighted on clusters of berries on the buck bushes, and were seen to peck at the berries for sometime, apparently eating many of them. This shrub is one of the most common and widely distributed woody plants in uncultivated lands about Bardstown, but the large crop of berries produced annually seem to be almost wholly untouched by birds.

On March 12, 1920, I saw three or four purple finches on the ground in a woods searching among the fallen leaves. I could not determine on what they were feeding, but this is the only instance of ground feeding of this species that I have ever observed.

Whenever present, the purple finch is closely associated with the blooming elm trees in the spring. On numerous occasions I have observed it feeding on the buds and blooms of both the common elm (*Ulmus americana*) and the slippery elm (*U. fulva*). To my mind, one of the most delightful treats of the spring migration in the Bardstown region was the return of the purple finch. Usually appearing when the odor of blooming elms seems to blend with their wild, delicate warble, the purple finch is the embodied spirit of a fair March day.

The spring of 1920 was very backward. Slippery elms were still blooming late in April. On the 27th a dozen or more purple finches were observed feeding on the bloom of several small slippery elms growing along the bluffs overlooking the Beech Fork river. Four birds from the flock flew down to a smooth sumach (*Rhus glabra*) near where I was standing and for some time all four of them fed on the sumach seed.

CEDAR WAXWING—(*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Having a reputation as a large feeder on fruit and a small consumer of insects, I was greatly interested to find, some years ago, a flock of cedar waxwings that seemed to be feeding entirely on insects. This occasion was on the afternoon of May 14, 1916. I chanced to be at the Beech Fork River, a mile south of Cherry Hill, and on my arrival I noticed quite a number of small birds "flycatching" over the river. A flock of flycatchers would have been a novelty indeed, so with keen anticipation I approached the river bank where the birds were perched in the sycamore trees and willow bushes that lined the river shore at this point. I was surprised, though not disappointed, to find that my "flycatchers" were cedar waxwings.

There were, possibly, a hundred individuals in the flock, but it was very difficult to determine their exact number owing to the constant flying from place to place of many birds at the same time. While perching they sat very erect, assuming the pose of flycatchers, and like flycatchers they chose points of vantage from which to fly out after a passing insect. In action they appeared almost as expert as phoebe or wood pewee, catching many insects at the first attempt, while others were pursued with much turning and twisting on the part of the waxwing. Ten to twenty birds were always on the wing in the act of pursuing and capturing insects. They were so very alert, or so craved insect food, that frequently two birds gave chase to the same victim, and several times three birds pursued the same one.

Most of the waxwings were well up in the trees and capturing insects thirty to sixty feet in the air; a few, however, were stationed atop some willow bushes growing in the water and these caught low flying insects. After making a capture the waxwings frequently returned to the point from which they flew, but more often other favorable perches were chosen, and frequently a bird flew entirely across the river after making its

catch. It was impossible to keep a particular individual under observation for more than two or three minutes as they were continually shifting their positions, and so many birds on the wing at one time was often very confusing when attempting to follow up the movements of a certain bird.

I could not determine the identity of the insects caught but it could be seen that different size insects were captured, and it seemed that every insect, regardless of species, was pursued immediately on being perceived by the waxwings. It was likely that the larger part of the insects caught were small diptera as there were many insects of that order in flight. After watching these birds for nearly an hour, apparently they pursued insects with as much vigor as when I first arrived at the river, and their numbers had not decreased. There was no fruit, either wild or cultivated, anywhere nearby and as the waxwings kept to the sycamores and willows, directly on the river bank, it appeared that insect food, taken on the wing, was the only thing that attracted them at the time.

A week later, May 21, 1916, I visited the same place and found about twenty-five waxwings engaged in "flycatching" as actively as on the other occasion, a week previous. However, on visiting the river on May 28, 1916, expressly for the purpose of determining if the waxwings were still lingering there, I found that they were not, and they were not seen again during the summer along the river.

On a number of occasions in late summer and early fall cedar waxwings were noticed "flycatching" from the tops of the apple trees in the orchard at Cherry Hill Farm. Several times in the fall I have seen individuals of a flock capturing insects from the tops of red cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) while others of the same flock fed on the cedar berries. At all times while capturing insects on the wing, the attitude of the waxwing while perching was strictly a characteristic flycatcher profile. In a hawk-like position, with crest erect, the attitude of the flycatching waxwing was quite a contrast with the seemingly indolent attitude assumed by the cherry-eating waxwing.

During the apple bloom season of 1916, cedar waxwings were continually present in small flocks among the blooming apple trees in the orchard at Cherry Hill Farm. I had supposed that they were among the apple blossoms for the purpose of catching

insects as were the orioles and warblers, but watching them closely on one occasion I saw that they were pulling the petals from the apple blossoms and swallowing them. Nearly every bird in the flock was eating apple bloom petals and those that were not sat lazily among their companions as if they could eat no more. I observed the same thing on several subsequent occasions, and it appeared each time that the waxwings fed solely on the apple bloom and in no way molested the hordes of insects among the blooming trees.

Sour cherries were sometimes eaten by the waxwings at Cherry Hill but usually only at the time that the fruit was just beginning to ripen. The actual loss from the depredation of waxwings was altogether insignificant as far as the cherry crop at Cherry Hill was concerned. The wild cherry (*Prunus serotina*) was much eaten in season by this species whenever it was present, though frequently it was absent during late summer at the time wild cherries abound. The frost grape (*Vitis cordifolia*) seemed to be a favorite food in the fall and as long as they remained on the vines in winter. Hackberries (*Celtis occidentalis*) were also eaten in winter and as they remained on the trees well into the spring they were probably eaten at that season.

CATBIRD — (*Dumetella carolinensis*)

The catbird has a wide reputation as a cherry and strawberry depredator. During the cherry season at Cherry Hill it was one of the most regular visitors to the cherry trees but the actual loss of cherries eaten by birds was not noticeable. The first few strawberries were usually punctured by catbirds but by the time the berry season was well started the berries were seldom molested.

On June 12, 1920, while standing near a large sweet cherry tree in the yard at Cherry Hill, I noticed a catbird perched on a large knot on the trunk of the tree seven or eight feet above the ground. In the center of the knot there was a small hole, caused by decay, from which emerged a steady stream of termites, or "flying ants," on which the catbird was feeding. It snapped up the insects just after they took wing and were still within a few inches of the hole from which they flew. During a minute's time it caught at least twenty of the insects, every one in the air, but the bird sat on the knot and turning its head to conform

with the direction in which the termites flew, snapped them up as dexterously as a flycatcher would have taken them on the wing. Too near approach, on my part, caused the catbird to fly.

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Bæolophus bicolor*)

During twelve years residence at Cherry Hill Farm I had never seen any species of bird eat cultivated grapes, of which there were many on the place, until August 9, 1921. While standing under an arbor covered with Concord on that date, a titmouse flew from the orchard nearby and alighted among the grapes only ten or twelve feet from me. Flitting among the grapes it soon pulled one from a bunch and quickly swallowed it; after a few seconds it pulled another grape and swallowed it as quickly as the first. Then, as if entirely satisfied, it flew off to the orchard to join several of its kind who were busy among the orchard trees.

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Penthestes carolinensis carolinensis*)

I had never seen any bird feed on the seed of the redbud tree (*Circes canadensis*), nor can I find any published account of such an occurrence. Therefore, the following incident may be worth recording: On August 23, 1921, I was in a small thicket where redbud trees were numerous. Hearing a peculiar noise that somewhat resembled the grating of a squirrel's teeth on the surface of a hard nutshell, but realizing that it came from some other source, I curiously walked toward the direction from which the noise seemed to come. I had not moved more than ten steps before I discovered the origin of the unknown noise. In a low redbud tree, on which there was an abundant crop of the dry seed pods, three chickadees were busily pulling the pods and extracting the seeds. The breaking of the dry pods was the curious noise that I had heard, and as the three birds were continually working at the pods the crackling noise was likewise continual. Apparently, these three chickadees fed on the redbud seeds with appetite as, for several minutes, my presence very near them did not disturb their work. It was plainly seen that they were not merely nibbling at the seeds, but were swallowing them as fast as they could be removed from the pods.

Covington Pike, Dayton, Ohio

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