

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS OF VARIATIONS IN BIRD NESTING HABITS

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During the past three years I have noted further variations in nesting habits of some perching birds in the vicinity of Whytewold on Lake Winnipeg.¹ Examples are as follows:

WESTERN KINGBIRD

In 1981 I found a nest with string woven into various plant fibres and it was bound to the branch of an oak tree with string. Close to the nest a thin long narrow strip of red material hung down from the branch.

In 1981 another bird had woven into grassy fibres a great deal of nylon string from old fish nets. The usual composition is "... grasses, hair, wool, and various fibrous materials ..."⁴

EASTERN KINGBIRD

One nest was constructed mainly of wool-nylon yarn (medium blue, pale blue, and white) with just enough plant fibres to bind the yarn together.³ The usual composition is "... twigs, grasses, dry grasses and plant fibres."⁵

In 1981 I observed, for the first time, a nest on the branch of a spruce tree 4.8 m from the ground.

BLUE JAY

This species sometimes uses a little paper in its nest construction.⁵ I watched one of these birds pick up from our yard several strips of white toilet paper 10 cm by 30 cm. It carried them about 45 m away to build its nest 5.4 m up in an oak tree. (It used some twigs and grassy fibres also.)

NORTHERN ORIOLE

In 1981 one female picked up mostly white string to weave her nest, which was about 9 m above the ground, in an aspen poplar in our yard. She picked up several 20 cm lengths at a time, but did not touch any pieces of woolen yarn.

Another female didn't pick up any white string, but chose to use various colours of wool-nylon yarn which I had scattered about the yard for nest building purposes. She did not use any of the red yarn.

Two nests were composed of a great deal of nylon string from old fish nets. The usual composition is "plant fibres, hair and twine ..."⁶

YELLOW WARBLER

Six nests in trees were from 4.5 to 10.5 m above the ground. The nests of this bird are "most often 0.9 m to 2.4 m up but rarely as high as 12 m" and construction is of "plant fibres, grasses, shredded bark, sometimes of twine or cotton wool."⁵ I have found that various man-made materials are now being used, such as kleenex, paper, white string and also very thin strips of clear plastic.²

AMERICAN ROBIN

Many nests of this species have white string and/or kleenex woven among plant fibres and grasses. In 1981, there was an unusual nest one side of which was covered with a fairly large piece of aluminum foil and a clump of white paper. This nest was

built in the crotch of the trunk and an upright branch of an oak tree.

LEAST FLYCATCHER

A nest of this species was fastened to a horizontal limb of an oak tree 7.5 m from the ground. Several pieces of white string and strips of yellow kleenex were woven with some plant fibres.³ Usually the nest is a "compact, deep cup, well made of bark, weed stems, grasses, etc. . . ."⁶

EASTERN WOOD PEWEE

On many occasions I have watched these birds build a second nest in the same season, due to predators, but in 1981 I observed the same female build 4 nests in different oak trees; two were in our yard and two were in close proximity to our property. Each time she began to incubate a predator must have disturbed the nest. She commenced to sit on the fourth nest on 21 July. At no time did I see her take any material from the unsuccessful nests, but she persevered with the arduous task of collecting silken webs, lichens, and fine grasses, taking a week to build each nest.

CATBIRD

One nest was located in an oak tree entwined with Virginia Creeper

and situated 3 m from the ground. It was composed mostly of plant fibres, grasses, two small pieces of white paper, and a little plastic.⁴ Usually the nest of this bird is "in thick shrubbery . . . between 0.9 m to 2.4 m above ground . . . made of twigs, weed stems, grass and leaves."⁵

In 1981 another nest in an oak tree was on a lower bare branch 1.5 m from the ground. The oak tree was surrounded by hawthorne and hazelnut bushes. (This nest was composed mainly of twigs.)

It is very interesting to find that each summer brings with it new observations in bird nesting habits.

¹ BANCROFT, J. 1978. Variations in bird nesting habits. *Blue Jay* 36(2): 120.

² BANCROFT, J. 1979. Double-brooded Yellow Warbler. *Blue Jay* 37(3): 170.

³ BANCROFT, J. 1981. Flycatcher Family. *Blue Jay* 39(2): 106.

⁴ BANCROFT, J. 1981. Changing Nesting Habits of the Catbird. *Blue Jay* 39(2): 113.

⁵ GODFREY, W. 1966. The birds of Canada. *Nat. Mus. Can. Bull.* 203.

⁶ HARRISON, H. H. 1975. A field guide to birds' nests in the United States east of the Mississippi River. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

TUNED IN AND TURNED ON

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Last summer I was part of the team of naturalists interpreting the natural and human history of Prince Albert National Park. While I was working at the park nature centre one drizzly afternoon in July, a pair of excited visitors urged me to follow them outside. Unsuccessfully bridling a child-like enthusiasm, they

soon acquainted me with object of their attention. A gray-brown bird somewhat less than robin-sized hopped toward the steps of the building. It was a Brown-headed Cowbird acting in a quite unexpected manner.

I crouched for a closer look and extended a curious hand. Paying little attention, the bird busied itself foraging for bits of leaves and seeds. It deftly snatched up the membranous wing of a dead damselfly and gobbled it down.

Absolutely unafraid it waddled through our legs and over our toes. When approached the bird neither flinched nor shied away but hopped through the arch created by my leg as I knelt. At first I thought this might be a young or injured bird and hence flightless. However, after five minutes of wandering through the gathering crowd it flew without difficulty into an aspen, then over the top of the nature centre. I never saw the bird again that summer.

Birds like the Gray Jay and Clark's Nutcracker are often unafraid of humans and are rather bold. Still they exhibit a degree of caution when robbing food from picnic tables or scavenging in trash cans. A foray into the bird's "safety zone" elicits an avoidance response, one the cowbird did not show. It acted as if it knew it was unthreatened by people, and indeed no one was about to cause it harm. The confrontation would have been different (and probably fatal for the cowbird) had a fox or domestic dog or cat been present. The survival value of such nonchalant behaviour must be very low.

Even without attempting to answer the questions posed by this unusual bird behaviour, I felt that the observation was of intrinsic value. I decided it was a time to say very little. To appreciate nature, it does not always take a script-perfect presentation, audio-visual aids, or even an attempted explanation.

Perhaps a collection of first-hand experiences similar to this cowbird observation might foster a better understanding of nature on the part of the ordinary person. The resulting appreciation and concern could influence people when they are asked for their opinion, or to allocate funds or cast a ballot on an environmental issue. It could start people on the road to being "tuned in and turned on" to natural environments.

MAGPIE ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE MOUSE

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On 3 January 1982, while driving along a grid road northwest of Maidstone, Saskatchewan, Sheila Lamont and I watched a Black-billed Magpie flying over a field towards the road. As it crossed the road it suddenly plunged into the ditch out of our view behind an approach. After two or three seconds it re-appeared carrying a dark object in its bill which it dropped after flying a few feet. The magpie plunged back into the ditch, retrieved the object and again dropped it. It appeared as if it was going to plunge after the object once more but was frightened away by our approaching vehicle.

Curious as to what type of "garbage" the magpie had been trying to carry away I stopped to investigate. To my surprise I saw nothing in the ditch. Closer examination found tracks which revealed that a mouse had come out of a small tunnel and was running along the ditch when the magpie captured it. The mouse tracks re-appeared about four feet along in the ditch and again disappeared only to re-appear again. The mouse tracks then led to a tunnel where it had apparently burrowed back under the safety of the snow.

The tracks appeared to be of a Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus* sp.) but I am not certain of this identification.

Although the Black-billed Magpie is known to be a very opportunistic feeder, I did not expect one to attempt to capture live prey the size of an adult mouse.