

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER AT COLEVILLE, SASKATCHEWAN

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The normal visitors to our bird feeder behind our home in Coleville are House Sparrows and Black-capped Chickadees. We have fed these two faithful species for years, but 1990 proved to be different.

One morning in mid-November 1990 after a heavy snowfall, we were surprised to look out our kitchen window to discover a Blue Jay at our feeder. Next came a Snow Bunting. He seemed to fit in with the sparrows but was more interesting to watch.

A few days later a woodpecker arrived. It was different from any we had ever seen. Upon looking it up in the bird book, it was clearly a Red-bellied Woodpecker.

We phoned our birder friend, Jean Harrows, who lives 12 mi. from Coleville and ten mi. north of Kindersley. She confirmed that from the description that bird could only be a Red-bellied Woodpecker, far beyond its normal range. Jean listed this unusual woodpecker as a footnote to her 1990 Christmas bird count report, though Coleville is just outside of her area. At that time the confirmatory photographs had not been developed. Since the woodpecker had not been seen during a regular count, it was not included in the summary compiled by Wayne Harris.

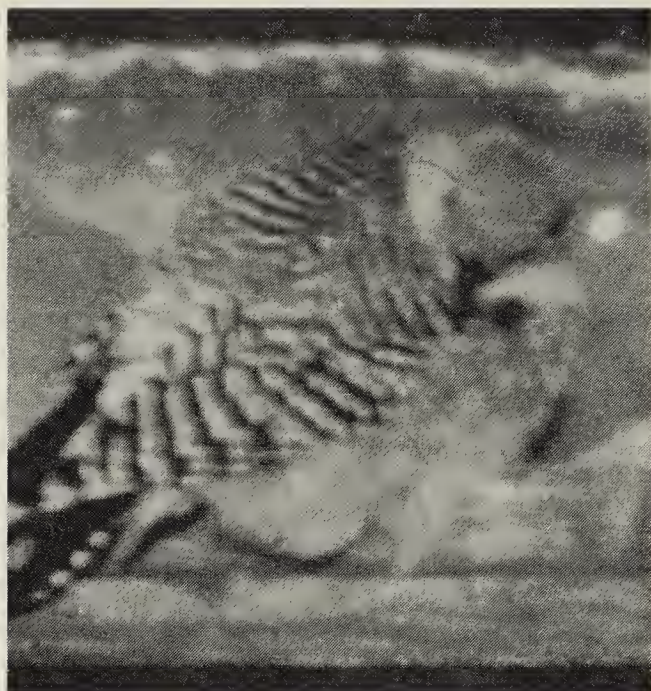
We have a frost shield installed on our kitchen window to allow a clear view of the feeder. The woodpecker would take the sunflower seeds from the feeder and the pumpkin seeds from the compost and cache them for future use in the bark of the trees in the yard. He chose the sunny side of the trees, in the shelter of a building. He also enjoyed the suet that was available.

The feeder food was mainly a commercial mix of cracked corn, sunflowers and various seeds. We added some canary seed and screenings obtained from a farmer to cut costs, as we were feeding twenty pounds of food per week.

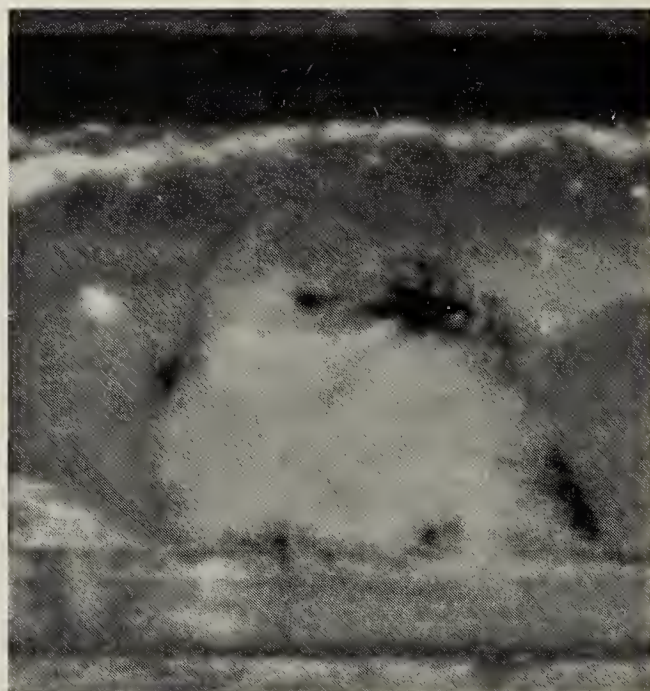
The order of feeding at our station was fun to watch. The ever-hungry sparrows would back off when the jay appeared. However, when the woodpecker arrived, he "rushed the roost" and the jay left. The sparrows would stay close by and tease him. The woodpecker would hiss and stand his ground.

One day the woodpecker sat on the feeder, preening in the sun, and guarding the feeder for about an hour. As we had not yet filled it that morning, he was making sure he had his daily ration. We chose that opportunity to take his photograph.

Our photographs were taken with



Red-bellied Woodpecker. Beth Dales



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a 200 mm lens, plus a 2x converter, through two panes of glass and the frost shield. We met Dr. Stuart Houston this summer and loaned him the transparencies, from which he made the prints shown above.

January 1991 brought a very cold snap and blizzard. Although they had been daily visitors until then, the woodpecker and the Snow Bunting did not come to us again. Both con-

tinued to be seen at two other feeding stations in Coleville until the end of February, for a total stay of over three months. The jay visited our feeder until early May.

It may be years before we have such an interesting visitor again. Up to November 1991, we have only had a late robin, on his way south through the snow.

Now when I had mastered the language of the water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great [Mississippi] river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river. *Mark Twain, 1883. Life on the Mississippi.*