
NOTES AND LETTERS

BIRD NESTS IN GRAIN BINDERS

On page 213 of *Blue Jay* 63(4), under CORRIGENDA, referring to the story of the Loggerhead Shrike nesting on the threshing machine, Mr. Hrushka wrote "The only bird to build a nest in a grain binder is a House Wren, which builds its nest in the twine box." I want to point out that Mountain Bluebirds also found the round hole of the twine box irresistible for a nest site, even in the semi-wooded parkland, north of North Battleford, SK. A pair nested in the twine box of our grain binder annually when I was growing up in the late 1930s-early 1940s.

- Gustave J. Yaki, 420 Brunswick Ave. SW, Calgary, AB T2S 1N8

OWL FOOD CACHES

I really enjoyed reading the note on the Burrowing Owl and the number of food items cached. I've seen Pygmy Owls capture voles and fly into the forest with them, returning promptly to capture another. Most interesting behaviour. As well, I've seen Great Horned Owl nests lined with voles, but only a dozen or so. Amazing to me that 210 voles would be stockpiled!

- Linda Van Damme, 619 29th Ave. S, Creston, BC V0B 1G5

MITES ON SNOWY OWLS

I have noted on some Snowy Owls I have captured that there is a small mite-like insect which crawls to the surface of the feathers, then crawls back down again after a brief appearance. I have been told that these are not blood-sucking mites but live off the feathers and are of benefit

to the birds. If you have information about this could you print it in the *Blue Jay*?

- Sig Jordheim, Box 544, Kyle, SK S0L 1T0

[Editors' note: the following reply was provided by Terry Galloway, Professor of Entomology at the University of Manitoba.]

Dear Mr. Jordheim,

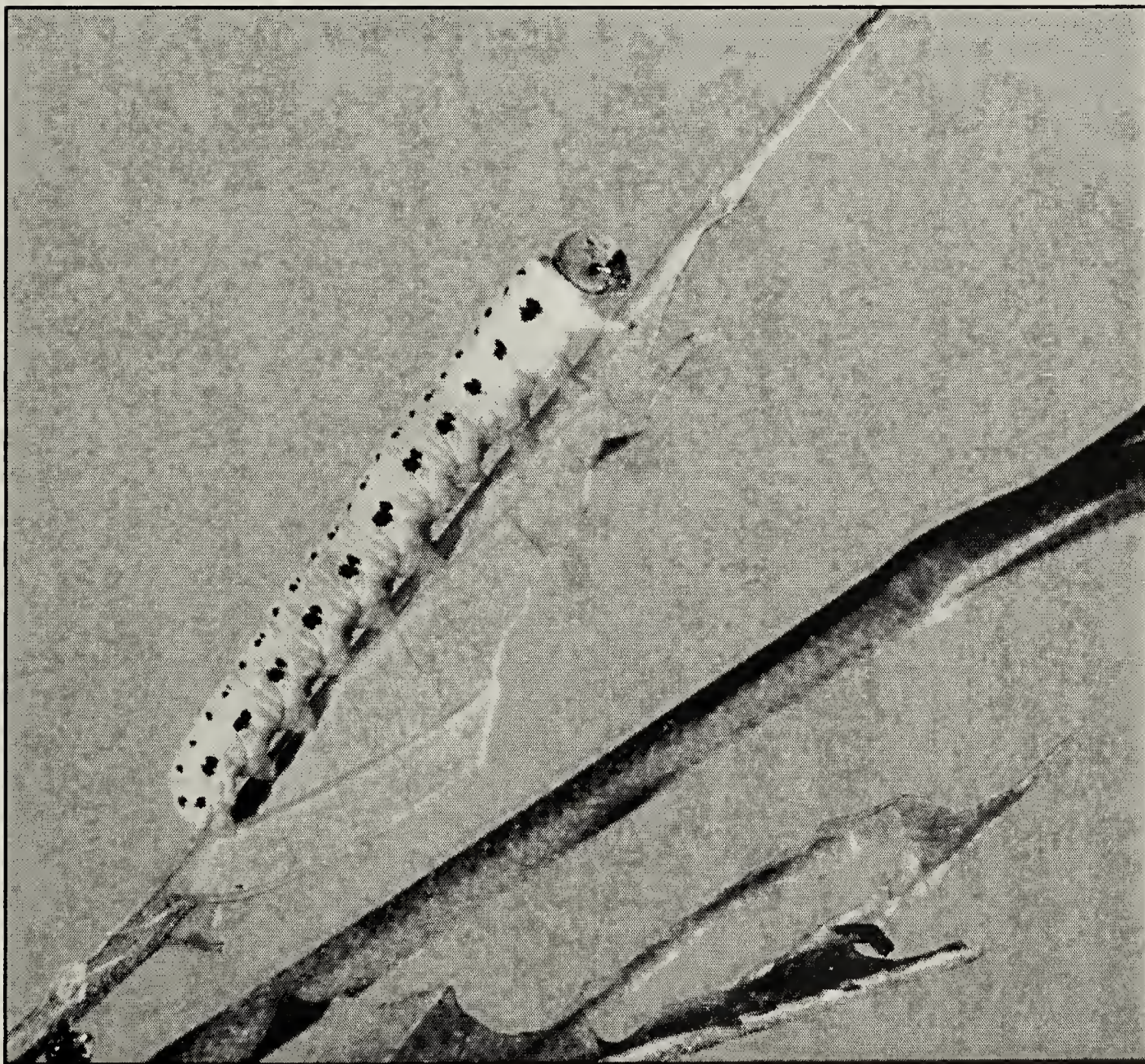
The small insect that you have observed on Snowy Owls is almost certainly a chewing louse. Owls are hosts to a number of different lice, mostly in the genera *Strigiphilus*, *Kurodaia* and *Colpocephalum*, and some species of owl, the Great Horned Owl, for example, may harbour more than one of these. However, Snowy Owls are known as a host for just one species, *Strigiphilus ceblebrachys*, and this is probably the one you have seen running among the feathers on your owls. In more than 50 Snowy Owls from Manitoba that I have examined for ectoparasites, this is the only species of louse that I find regularly, and more than 90% of these birds have been infested. One specimen from God's Lake Narrows was infested with more than 5,000 *S. ceblebrachys*! *Strigiphilus* spp. are primarily feather feeders, and in processing these lice onto microscope slides for proper identification, I often find their crop completely packed full with uniformly cut pieces of feather barbs. Feathers are extremely difficult to digest, so these lice may have symbiotic bacteria in their guts to assist in the breakdown process. I can't say that these lice

would be of benefit to the bird as a result of their feeding on the feathers. In fact, when a bird is heavily infested, especially in the case of Snowy Owls, I would suspect that damage to the feather would more likely affect the insulative properties of feathers and could make thermoregulation more difficult. I should also mention that I have occasionally seen a variety of other species of lice on Snowy Owls, species typical of their prey, both mammal and bird. These lice probably ended up on the owl quite accidentally and I have seen no evidence that they become permanently established on their accidental hosts.

DOGWOOD SAWFLIES

I found the mystery photo of the sawfly larvae most interesting. You had to go to Maine to get your pictures but I only had to step out onto our front lawn to photograph what appears to be a similar species. I found about 20 larvae actively feeding on a Red Osier Dogwood and thinking they were moth caterpillars set out to photograph them. It wasn't until I was taking the pictures that I noticed the number of prolegs and concluded it was not a moth.

- Robert E. Gehlert, Box 11, Site 5, RR 2, Tofield, AB T0B 4J0



Sawfly larva extended, showing at least 6 pairs of prolegs. Moth and butterfly larvae have five or fewer. (Also see p. 62.)

R. E. Gehlert