NOTES AND LETTERS

CEDAR WAXWINGS EAT APPLE BLOSSOMS

In the Spring of 2003 I received a phone call from Lorraine Hovdebo in Birch Hills, SK, asking me why the Cedar Waxwings were feeding on her apple blossoms. Not having seen or heard of this behavior before, we both agreed that it was likely an isolated happening and that, though interesting, was not a type of behavior that would be repeated. However, this past May I received another phone call from the same person stating that the waxwings were back in her tree eating her flowers.

Still somewhat sceptical, I decided to go see for myself, but then I spotted some waxwings flitting around in an apple tree in our own orchard. I walked over and found that what I thought were 'a few' actually became 33 of the dapper birds feeding on the flowers of one tree. I approached to within a few metres and observed them as they picked at the blossoms and ingested the various parts.

After a few minutes, I went up to the tree only to find that the birds were very reluctant to leave, merely flying higher into the branches where they watched from a metre or so away as I examined where they'd been eating. From most of the flowers, only the petals had been stripped away, but from some the stamens and pistils also had been removed.

Finding all this so unusual, I sent an e-mail query out into the birding community and received several responses. Don Weidl wrote, "When I was a young boy in Broadview, our neighbour, in the springtime, often used to shoot the Cedar Waxwings that were in his fruit trees. The old man claimed that the birds were eating his fruit." Becky Whittam of Bird Studies Canada wrote, "Early in the spring and summer, before fruit is available, flowers would appear to be a prime source of food." Stuart Houston found a good deal of material describing this feeding behaviour. Witmer and co-authors give the results of the analysis of stomach contents which answers questions about the eating of flowers by this bird: "Diet analysis from the E U.S. (primarily the NE U.S.) over 65 years showed that fruit constitutes 84% of annual diet, flower parts 4%, and insect prey 12%; eats flowers for brief periods in spring (44% of diet in May...), a time of year when fruit supplies are low."[1] Thus, it appears that what is unusual waxwing behaviour in our area is actually quite common elsewhere, including in Regina, where Bob Luterbach wrote in an e-mail to Stuart Houston, "I have seen this behaviour many times both within Regina parks and within my yard at Tyvan."

It may be of interest that fruit production in our orchard does not appear to have been harmed.

1. WITMER, M.C., D.J. MOUNTJOY and L. ELLIOTT. 1997. Cedar Waxwing. In: Poole, A., and F. Gill (eds.). The Birds of North America, No. 309. The Birds of North America Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

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DOWN TO EARTH - AN ALASKAN EAGLE IS TRACKED DOWN IN SASKATCHEWAN

On 26 December, 2000, I received a call about a Golden Eagle found dead west of Leader, Saskatchewan, along the South Saskatchewan River. As a Conservation Officer with Saskatchewan Environment (SE), I went out to retrieve the bird, and found that it had a radio transmitter affixed to its back, as well as an official leg band. There were no markings or any identification on the transmitter to indicate who had originally captured the bird. I called a few SE employees, but no one knew of a possible origin for a radio-carrying eagle. I called the bird banding headquarters in Washington, DC; they said it would take several weeks to identify and contact the bander. I placed the bird in the SE freezer, and on 3 January 2001, I took the bird to a local taxidermist to have it skinned and the carcass sent to the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan to determine the cause of death.

On 8 January, I received a telephone call from Carol McIntyre, a biologist in Alaska. She was requesting my help to locate a missing eagle carrying a radio transmitter! When I told her that I had her eagle, she was amazed. It turned out that the transmitter signal encoded both location and temperature. The transmitter was set to broadcast a signal only once every three days, to extend the life of the battery. Carol McIntyre had received a signal on or about 24 December, but while the bird was in the freezer, signal transmission apparently was blocked. The transmitter was removed from the freezer and from the bird at the taxidermist's, and on 4 January, Carol McIntyre began receiving signals again. She was able to pinpoint the bird's location to a 100 x 30 m area in Leader SK. In addition, she knew something was wrong because the temperature signal indicated +19C. She was sure it could not be that warm in Saskatchewan in January!

Carol McIntyre told me that the eagle had been banded and affixed with the transmitter as a juvenile in August 1999 southwest of Fairbanks, Alaska, in Denali National Park. During the winter of 1999-2000, it had migrated to the area west of Leader, near the community of Estuary along the South Saskatchewan River. In summer 2000, the bird returned to the Denali National Park area. It spent part of that fall around Edmonton before arriving at Estuary in mid-December 2000.

The veterinary pathologist reported that the bird had died of starvation. Over the previous three years, Carol McIntyre had banded and tracked 47 golden eagles. In her study, nearly 70% of the juvenile birds did not survive to the end of their first year. The primary causes of death were starvation and electrocution. Two birds had been killed illegally, both in Alberta. This was the first of her marked eagles to die of starvation during its second year.

I asked Carol McIntyre how she came to telephone me in the Leader office. She said that after she had determined Leader was the SE office closest to the bird's radio signal, she had found my name and number on the SE web page. It was only coincidence that I had already picked up the bird. The radio transmitter was returned to Carol McIntyre for future work.

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AN IMPRESSIVE LADY

Almost daily, for the past nine years, I have taken our Brittany spaniel for a run in a small park just three blocks from our home in SW Winnipeg. A small man-made retention pond adjacent to the parking lot in the park has always been a good place to look for birds. Over the years this shallow catch-basin has developed – all quite naturally – into an attractive cattail marsh. For the past several years it has supported a small colony of Red-winged Blackbirds. In spring 2003, I began feeding these birds, sprinkling mixed birdseed on top of adjacent large-diameter fence posts as well as on the nearby pavement. This was not so much for their sake as it was for mine, to bring them up close and thus to better enjoy their colour and behaviour. This worked, and soon the Redwings, as well as a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds from a nearby deeper marsh, were enjoying my almost daily provision of food.

Thus, I soon discovered that a resident female redwing was missing a foot, her entire left foot somehow having been severed distal to the tarsal or "ankle" joint (Fig 1). Even on a windy day, despite this obvious handicap, the bird seemed completely at ease balancing on her right foot, though occasionally resting on her abdomen. I was able to show this bird to several people during the summer. Judging by her constancy and aggressive behaviour towards other female redwings, as well as the attentive behaviour of one of the males, I assumed that she was nesting in the little marsh.

Inspired by this observation, I wrote a poem about the bird (see poetry section). A year later, in spring 2004, I was astonished and pleased to find that this bird had survived and returned to her breeding site for a second season. I enlisted the help of local birder and photographer Christian Artuso, who kindly captured the image and spirit of this indefatigable and adaptable bird. I can't imagine how she has managed to cling to vertical cattail stalks with only one foot while constructing a nest. I presume that she has done this at least twice, nest-building in redwings solely being the role of the female. This matter requires further observation!

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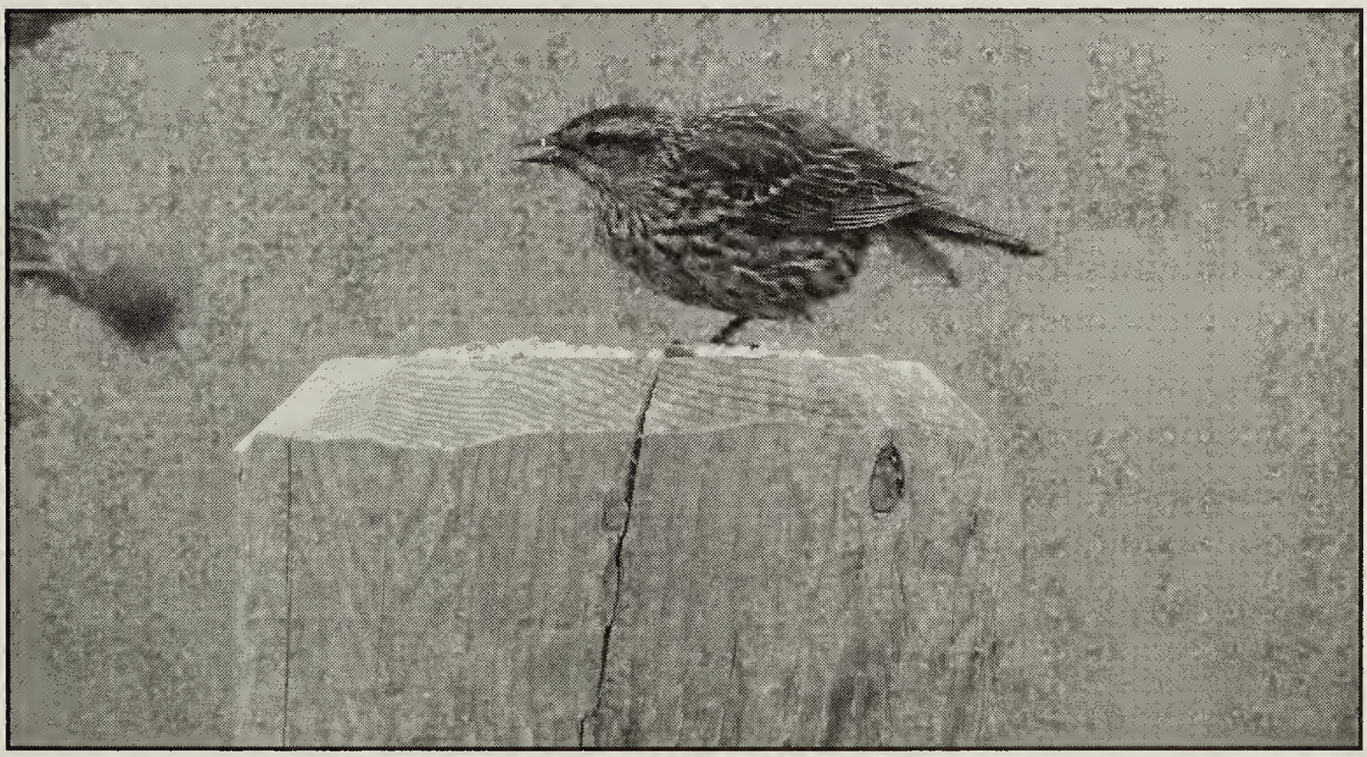

Figure 1. Female Red-winged Blackbird with only one leg. ***Christian Artuso***