

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

by Marg Hendrick

It can be interesting to observe the behaviour of birds and this can be done either at your feeder or in the field. All it takes is a little time and patience. The discoveries that you make for yourself will prove more interesting than facts you read in a book. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a field sighting is worth even more!

A case in point. For many years I have known that various species mantle their prey in an effort to retain it for themselves; but it was only this past summer that I witnessed this behaviour for myself. While driving I noticed a Turkey Vulture in the middle of the road devouring a road kill. As my car approached the bird held its ground, and at the same time spread its wings around its food in an effort to protect it. The vulture did not fly off until the moment the car passed beside it. I was unable to identify the animal it had been eating. Upon stopping to investigate I was amazed - even though I knew vultures generally pick the bones clean - to see every rib except the one the bird was working on shining clean! No waste there!

Many people are revolted by Turkey Vultures. They consider them ugly with their black feathers accentuating their small bare red heads, and they find their habit of eating carrion disgusting. However, considering the clean-up job vultures do in nature, it is good for the sake of their own cleanliness that their heads are bereft of feathers.

Scarlet Tanagers seem to be admired by everyone. At Point Pelee I was astonished to see them feeding on smelly dead fish. Somehow I didn't picture this species in that role. It was a cold, rainy day, and perhaps there was not much insect life available and it was any port in a storm!

One does not generally think of the Black-capped Chickadee as a scavenger. Yet I discovered that the chickadee, who loves the seed and suet at your feeder, also eats carrion. The first time I noticed this was when one fed on an electrocuted Red-tailed Hawk. I was even more surprised when I discovered several chickadees avidly feeding on a dead skunk. I watched them for some time, and I can assure you that the aroma was anything but

pleasant, but the little chickadees didn't seem to mind - and no one seems to find them disgusting! Yet another behavioural observation concerning chickadees. I watched a pair excavating their nest hole in the soft, rotting wood of an old birch stump. First one bird would enter the hole and scrabbling noises were heard. After several minutes it popped out and flew to a nearby tree. Immediately the second bird entered the hole and came out with its mouth full of wood chips which were spat out. It made several trips, each time carrying out the chips. Eventually it flew to a tree whereupon the first bird flew back into the hole. The scrabbling noises began again and the whole process was repeated! Shared labour! The above observations are not of earth-shaking importance, but they do show how amazing nature is, and how it can provide one with some interesting moments.

Back to the subject of Turkey Vultures. Eleanor Taylor has had up to seven of these birds roosting in an old pine tree near her home. The numbers have been declining, and Eleanor is going to keep a record of when the last bird leaves. As mentioned earlier, Turkey Vultures are not handsome birds seen close-up; but in flight it is quite a different story. On their Oct. 14 field trip, the North Leeds Birdwatchers (NLB) saw 42 vultures - sometimes 10 or 12 birds soaring overhead at a time. It was a beautiful sight to see these large birds with their black and silver wings held uptilted and motionless against the blue sky. They moved along effortlessly, rocking to and fro as they rode the wind.

House Finches have been visiting Katherine Side's feeder. Possibly they are a part of the group that have been present at Marjorie Jackson's feeder all summer. Now if I could only entice them down the highway to mine! Lynn Evans mentioned that the white American Robin that the NLB discovered near her home on Cedar Valley Road this spring, remained all summer. It will be interesting to see if it returns next year.

Elsie Goodman was the first to mention large flights of Canada Geese moving south. Shortly after the first strong flights there appeared to be lull, and as this is being written away from Elgin I have no idea if the numbers

picked up again. At the time of writing (Oct. 19) southward migration is still underway. Soon, however, winter will be here and many of the birds that winter over will be present at your feeders. Please call me at 359-5178 with your sightings. Until next month

GOOD BIRDING!



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