



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

by Marg Hendrick

Feathers are truly one of nature's marvels, and they are unique to birds. This special covering 'molds' birds into their various shapes and 'dresses' them in a myriad of colours. This is just the beginning, for there are many types and functions of feathers, but in this column there is only space to discuss the subject in general terms.

Colours and patterns fulfill several functions. In some cases they serve to conceal; the American Woodcock, with its mottled appearance 'disappears' as it sits quietly on the leaf litter of the forest floor. Some feathers help to confuse the enemy; the white outer tail feathers of a Dark-eyed Junco are flashed when the bird is flushed, thus momentarily confusing the intruder while the junco makes its escape. The Killdeer uses its orangish rump and spread tail to attract attention as it attempts to lure a potential interloper away from its nest. Male Red-winged Blackbirds use their red-and-yellow epaulets to warn away other males and attract females during the courtship season.

As mentioned earlier, feathers also help to contour birds. Thus a Rufous-sided Towhee has a long-tailed look, whereas a European Starling, with its short tail, appears stubby. Blue Jays and Cedar Waxwings are crested, whereas American Robins are not. All this a result of feather shaping, and one must admit it is an improvement in appearance over the naked bird!

The smoothness of contour feathers, which include the rather stiff flight feathers of wings and tail, along with other specific biological adaptations, give birds a freedom in flight nothing short of miraculous. While on the subject of flight feathers, I would suggest that you examine as large a flight feather as you can find under a strong magnifying glass. Carefully stretch one of the vanes and notice how each barb emanating from the shaft seems to be somehow joined to its neighbouring barb. Then break the seal. If your magnifying glass is strong enough, you should be able to see tiny barbules. The upper barbules resemble tiny hooks - the lower flanges. Smooth

the feathers together and notice how the barbules "zip" together and the vane once again becomes a unit. One of the functions of a bird's preening is to 'zip' together any vane whose barbs have become temporarily disengaged. Not all feathers have 'zippers'. Others, such as the down feathers are soft and fluffy. These, assisted by semiplumes, which help to entrap air, serve to insulate the bird. Humans are well aware of the qualities of eiderdown.

Some feather adaptations produce special results: the serrated edges of the flight feathers of owls help to muffle the

sound of their flight; air passing through the odd shaped tail feathers of the Common Snipe results in the winnowing sound of its courtship flight; and the three stiff narrow outer primaries of the American Woodcock 'whistle' when the bird takes off in flight. This tends to confuse an intruder. So, there are feathers that give colour and shape to a bird; feathers which make flight possible; feathers to keep birds warm; feathers that attract the opposite sex, and feathers that assist in protection from predation. There are even more diversities of feathers not yet mentioned - but if I don't 'fly' on to your sightings I'll be out of space. Evening Grosbeaks appeared sporadically at local feeders from late October until mid-November. Miriam Ondra, John Goodman, Rene Waterfield, Leorene Hayes and Cheryl Coville have all reported them. For Cheryl it was a first, which is always nice!

On October 27 John Goodman had an American Tree Sparrow at his feeder. This species has a rufous head like a Chipping Sparrow, but sports a dark spot on its breast. The same day a Pileated

Woodpecker visited John's yard. Imagine my disappointment when the one I was seeing on my daily walks was killed by a passing vehicle.

Lynn Warren had the first Northern Cardinal she has ever had visit her feeder. Wonderful! Ellen Berryere saw a cardinal not far from her feeding station and has plans to entice it closer to feed there.

On November 5 Lillian MacCaul phoned to report Purple Finches, American goldfinches and Dark-eyed Juncos. A day later Rene Waterfield also had juncos, and somewhat earlier a White-throated Sparrow was in her yard.

Elaine Porter was fortunate to see a Barred Owl near her home. To make it even nicer, she was awakened in the night by its call. The ringing "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all" call of the Barred Owl is hauntingly beautiful. I'd be happy to lose my sleep anytime to hear it.

On October 31, 3 Common Snipe were feeding in the shallow water on Clifford Smith's lawn. The same day members of the North Leeds Birdwatchers (NLB) saw an Eastern Bluebird on the Davis

Lock Road.

Marie Flood described a bird that she saw on October 30. From her description it was probably one of the shrikes - possibly the Northern Shrike, because of the date it was seen. Members of the NLB saw this species (in a different area) on their October 31 Field Trip.

Jaquie Wanless was still seeing a Common Loon on Sand Lake November 9 and on November 14. NLB members saw 2 on Big Rideau Lake.

Sheila Orr spotted 50 Snow Buntings and a Northern Harrier on November 9 near Hwy. 32. Two Rough-legged Hawks were seen by Elsie Goodman on November 13, and a dark phase Rough-legged hunted over the fields not far from Elgin on November 14.

On November 12 Jaquie Wanless reported 75-100 Common Mergansers on Sand Lake, and NLB members spotted Mallards, Greater Scaup and Goldeneyes on Big Rideau Lake on their November 14 Field Trip.

Have a happy holiday season! The number to call with your sightings is 359-5178 and until February,

GOOD BIRDING!

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