

## Notes

### Wing Flashing Behaviour in a Northern Mockingbird

George Fairfield and Jean Fairfield

On the morning of 30 June 1997, George Fairfield watched a Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) foraging in an open area of sparse grassland on the shore of Lake Ontario near the southwestern point of Humber Bay Park West, Toronto.

The bird hopped up thirty or forty centimetres above the ground, quickly opened and closed its wings, and simultaneously spread and closed its tail, and then darted ahead to catch insects that flushed from the grass. It repeated this performance several times, and then flew off and disappeared into a nearby caragana planting.

The white flashes on the wings and the white outer tail feathers of the mockingbird appeared to provide a useful hunting tool when used in this way. The explosive effect was quite impressive due to the comparatively long wings and tail, and the contrast between the rather plain appearance of the bird with wings and tail folded and the spectacular black and white pattern produced when they opened.

On the morning of 7 July 1997, Jean Fairfield saw a mockingbird at the same place catch a large earthworm, fly to the caragana planting,

and feed a fully feathered young mockingbird.

Derrickson and Breitwisch (1992), in their contribution on the Northern Mockingbird in *The Birds of North America*, summarize the work of several writers on the subject of wing flashing as follows: "When walking or running on the ground, frequently raises wings ("wing flashes") half to fully open in a stereotyped manner, in several progressively higher jerky movements, exposing conspicuous white wing patch .... Function of this behavior unknown; speculations include startling insects or potential predators (especially nest predators) and as a component of territorial display". On the foraging behaviour, they note that: "Most arthropods taken by walking, running, or hopping along the ground. Typically, runs a short distance, stops, and lunges at prey on ground .... Also catches insects flying just above ground. Short grass preferred to long grass for such foraging."

The observations made on 30 June 1997 provide evidence that Northern Mockingbirds use wing flashing for startling insects while foraging.

## Literature Cited

**Derrickson, K.C. and R. Breitwisch** 1992.  
Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*). In *The Birds of North America*, No.7 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, editors).  
Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

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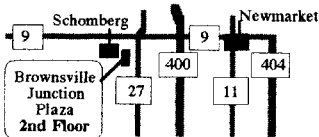
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