# *Notes*

## Simultaneous Anting by Three Species of Birds

Anne H. Davidson

At 0815h, on the morning of 6 July 1998, in Vanessa, Ontario, an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) flew down to the ground in my backyard (near the clothesline post). It ran around a bit and then returned to the spot where it had landed. The robin picked something up from the ground, but instead of eating, raised a wing and rubbed its beak several times under the wing. It repeated this action numerous times, alternating between the left wing and the right wing.

A Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) gleaning under a nearby feeder began to watch the robin with interest and moved over close to the other side of the post, continuing to watch it. Then the jay began to perform the same actions as the robin. About two minutes later, a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) flew to the bottom of the trumpetvine on the post and looked back and forth from the robin to the jay. The grosbeak then hopped down to the ground beside the jay and exhibited the same behaviour. Within another two minutes, a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak joined the female and the jay, and also began to pick up something from the ground and rub its beak under its wings, alternating from left to right.

The four birds continued until their activity brought a Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) over to investigate; its arrival caused the four birds to fly off. When they left, I went out to look at the spots where the robin and the other three birds had congregated. Where the robin had been was an anthill with small red ants. Where the other three birds had been were two anthills with tiny black ants. All four birds had been "anting".

The observation occurred two days after a heavy rainfall of several centimetres that followed an extended dry period. The temperature was 21.4°C, relative humidity was 75%, the barometer read 102.00 kPa, the wind was from the south at 1.8 km/h, and the dew point was 16.8°C.

### Discussion

Ehrlich et al. (1988) give an account of anting which describes the behaviour I observed, and comment that "the purpose of anting is not well understood, but the most reasonable assumption seems to be

that it is a way of acquiring the defensive secretions of ants, primarily for their insecticidal, miticidal, fungicidal, or bactericidal properties and, perhaps secondarily, as a supplement to the bird's own preen oil". The account discusses possible correlations between anting and high humidity/molting seasons, and closes with the advice that "if you see anting, be sure to make detailed notes of the circumstances in which it is taking place".

There was no indication in the account that an anting bird observed by other birds would result in the other birds beginning to ant. What I found most interesting about this sighting was that the robin's anting appeared to initiate the anting activity of the jay and the two grosbeaks.

**Literature Cited**

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# A Colour Variant of the Fox Sparrow

George Fairfield

Between 22 October and 8 November 1997, up to three Fox Sparrows (*Passerella iliaca*) appeared daily in our backyard in north Toronto, just west of Sherwood Park. Then, on 7 November, a Fox Sparrow appeared that was very different from the others. It was noticeably larger than the other Fox Sparrows, and this was easily seen as it was accompanied closely by a "normal" Fox Sparrow.

There was very little grey on the bird, just a little dappling of grey on the upper back. The head was reddish brown, the same shade as the tail. The red-brown of the head continued down the neck without a break to the central breast, where the breast spot is usually found. There was no grey on the neck, and the throat was solid red-brown. There was some pale streaking on the lower breast, but not as light as on the bird with which it was feeding. The general appearance was of a large, almost solid red-brown Fox Sparrow, with a little light streaking on the abdomen, and smallish beak. The bird was examined for one half hour from a distance of 10 metres

with 10X Swift binoculars under bright overcast sky.

**Discussion**

At first I thought that this must be one of the races of Fox Sparrow that does not usually occur in Ontario, but reference to Rising (1996) showed that the Red Fox Sparrow, which is the commonly occurring race in our area, is the reddest of the Fox Sparrow races. The only reference I could find in the literature to a colour morph in the Fox Sparrow was in Roberts (1955), where he states (on page 715) that "there is a 'rufous phase' (not occurring in Minnesota) in which the upperparts are nearly uniform rufous or chestnut". Roberts provides no reference for this statement. With the assistance of Mark Peck, I examined the specimens at the Royal Ontario Museum, but found no specimens that resembled the bird in our backyard.

In summary, the Fox Sparrow described above is a colour variant and not a true morph, because morphs are regularly occurring forms within a population, such as the morphs of the Snow Goose.

**Literature Cited**

***Rising, J.D.*** 1996. A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada. Academic Press, San Diego, California.

***Roberts, T.S.*** 1955. A Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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# Killdeer Incubates Common Snipe Egg

Charles J. Whitelaw

On 28 May 1998, a Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) nest containing four eggs (Figure 1) was discovered at the Wahnapitae sewage lagoons (Region of Sudbury). An adult Killdeer had been incubating the eggs, and its mate was nearby. Both birds offered some notes of protest and one showed a distraction display. It was noticed at this time that one of the eggs was quite different from the other three.

Upon close examination, it was ascertained that the nest contained three eggs of the Killdeer and one egg of the Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). The nest was located on gravel surrounded by scant green herbaceous vegetation, to a height of 10 cm. The location was at a corner of the dyke at the east end of the lagoon. On 3 June,

Figure 1: Nest of a Killdeer containing three Killdeer eggs and one Common Snipe egg, at Wahnapitae Sewage Lagoons, on 3 June 1998. Photo by *Charles J. Whitelaw.*

incubation continued normally, with both birds in attendance. On 4 June, the eggs were gone, and the nest and site were deserted. It is assumed that predation of some sort had taken place.

In late May 1997, a Killdeer nest was located at a position some 20 m from the 1998 nest site. It too ended in tragedy. In early June 1994, I flushed a snipe from a nest with two eggs at a point some 25 m distant from the 1998 nest location. The lagoons here are bordered by cattail (*Typha latifolia*) marsh on the east and south sides. Between the marsh and the dykes is a sedge (*Carex* spp.) meadow containing clumps of small (up to 2 m high) willows (*Salix* spp.). This area is an attractive nesting habitat for the Common Snipe, and several pairs breed here annually.

**Discussion**

Killdeer and Common Snipe eggs differ from each other in several ways. Snipe eggs average 2.3 mm greater in length, and 1.5 mm greater in breadth than Killdeer eggs. The eggs of both species are ovate-pyriform in shape. However, Killdeer eggs are quite pointed, while those of the snipe are not so pointed. Killdeer eggs have a creamy, buff ground colour, and are irregularly and boldly splashed and scrawled with black or blackish-

brown, chiefly about the larger end. Snipe eggs generally have a dark olive green ground colour, and are heavily blotched with dark brown over most of the egg surface. Killdeer eggs have no gloss, while those of the snipe are slightly glossy.

I can find no examples in the literature of a similar type of egg laying occurrence among shorebirds. Egg dumping, where one species lays eggs in the nest of another species, is well known among some North American waterfowl, particularly the cavity-nesting mergansers (*Mergus* spp.) and the marsh-nesting divers (Bent 1925). This habit is also known to occur with the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), and with the Black-billed Cuckoo (*C. erythropthalmus*) (Harrison 1975). Of course, this habit reaches full obligate parasitic status in the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).

There are examples of egg dumping within a species. For example, among passerines, an 8-egg clutch (the product of two females) has been found in the Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) (Peck and James 1998). Among shorebirds, nests of the American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) have been found with seven or eight eggs (Bent 1927). These were without doubt the product of two different females.

The situation described here, with the Killdeer and the Common Snipe, has possibly developed as a result of the close proximity of nest sites, along with the coincidental timing of egg laying.

## Literature Cited

***Bent, A.C.*** 1925. Life Histories of North American Wild Fowl, Part 2. United States National Museum Bulletin 126, Washington, D.C.

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