

Notes

Unusual European Starling Nesting Attempt

Larry Drew

I discovered the oddity in Figure 1 while exploring for nesting sites as a volunteer for the Ontario Nest Records Scheme. The site was an empty granary on my brother's farm in Kent County, Ontario. A European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) was observed at the location in early May 1998, and was apparently the architect of this unusual nesting attempt. The starling entered the granary through a hole in the outside wall under the eaves. However, the nesting material continuously trickled down from between the boards with each new delivery since there was nothing to stop it from falling. The stack of nesting material on the floor reached a height of 1.5 m before this failed nesting site was abandoned.

I had wondered if the pile had built up over two or more seasons, and questioned my brother whether he had noticed any of the material in the granary the year before. Remarkably, he described a similar pile existing that year, but had cleaned that pile up completely, as

he had for each of the previous four or more years!

Discussion

Starlings are aggressive competitors for nesting sites and will accept virtually any cavity to begin a nest (Peck and James 1987). The male establishes the nesting site and will carelessly accumulate a messy assortment of plant material (Cabe 1993). The female completes the nest after pairing. Cabe (1993) noted that "the amount of material depends in part on the size of the cavity". The persistence of European Starlings in attempting to construct a nest is well shown in this example from Kent County.

Literature Cited

- Cabe, P.R.** 1993. European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 48 (A. Poole and F. Gill, editors). Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Peck, G.K. and R.D. James.** 1987. Breeding Birds of Ontario: Nidology and Distribution. Volume 2: Passerines. Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

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Figure 1: Pile of material (1.5 m high) accumulated during failed nest-building attempt by European Starling. Photo by *Larry Drew*.

More Observations of White-winged Crossbills Foraging on Wood

Bill Crins and Dan Strickland

On 6 September 1998, between 0920h and 0930h, Crins observed six White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*) working on dead wood in a dead-tree swamp/marsh near the shore of Mineral Springs Lake, Huntsville, Ontario. The birds (one adult male, five juveniles) apparently were eating the dead wood from the moister, more rotten parts of stumps and snags of Yellow Birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*), White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), and Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*), at heights of 0.5 to 3 m above the ground. For the most part, the crossbills engaged in quiet twittering while they worked, although the male sang once. Numerous ants were flying in the vicinity, but there was no obvious evidence of ants emerging from the wood on which the crossbills worked.

During the morning of 23 February 1999, Strickland observed several White-winged Crossbills foraging on the rotting wood of 10

to 15 different old stumps in a swamp/marsh bordering Mud Bay at the north end of Galeairy Lake, Airy Township, Nipissing District, in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario. As many as six birds at a time were noted on a single stump, apparently eating the wood. Several of the stumps had flat tops, and were probably White Pines (*Pinus strobus*) cut during the early logging days in the area.

Crins and McRae (1998) noted that foraging on wood had been reported only rarely in White-winged Crossbills, but the recent observations published by them, along with those reported here, suggest that this may not be an uncommon form of behaviour in this species.

Literature Cited

- Crins, B. and D. McRae. 1998. White-winged Crossbills foraging on wood. Ontario Birds 16: 40-41.

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White-winged Crossbills Eating Wood Ash

Ron Tozer

On 9 September 1998, at about 1300h, Don Craighead and Doug Guay observed one male and two female White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*) land at a campfire pit on an island in Galeairy Lake in Algonquin Provincial Park (Nightingale Township, Haliburton County), Ontario. Craighead (*in litt.*) later reported that “they had landed outside the ring of rocks that formed the pit circle and proceeded to the gaps between the rocks which contained only the

burnt fire ash. There were no other materials in the area. The females only stayed briefly and then moved on around the pit and pecked at the ground area that was outside the ashes. The male stayed in the opening between the rocks and picked at the ash for 3 or 4 minutes. We were able to get our cameras and move into close position to photograph the birds, especially the male who ignored us even though I was only about 2 m from him” (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Male White-winged Crossbill eating wood ash. Photo by *Don Craighead*.

Discussion

I was unable to find any reference to wood ash being eaten by White-winged Crossbills in the literature, including extensive reviews of their food habits by Bent (1968) and Benkman (1992). However, there are published accounts of wood ash consumption by other bird species.

Some sightings involved incubating females leaving their nests to eat ash, and it was theorized that this behaviour might have been due to a calcium deficiency during the stress of egg production. Wood ash is rich in calcium (Pulliainen et al. 1978, Ficken 1989, des Lauriers 1994). McMillan (1948) observed a female Red Crossbill (*L. curvirostris*) "feed on what appeared to be bits of charcoal" at a campsite near its nest (containing one egg) in Yosemite National Park, California. Similarly, des Lauriers (1994) reported incubating female hummingbirds "repeatedly licking, and probably consuming, powdery gray wood ashes." His observations involved one Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*), one Blue-throated Hummingbird (*Lampornis clemenciae*), one Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*), and two Anna's Hummingbirds (*C. anna*), in Arizona and California. It has been speculated that "ash feeding by nesting birds may be more common than the limited records suggest" (des Lauriers 1994).

In contrast to the above accounts, other published observations of ash consumption occurred outside the breeding season, and included males. The occurrence described in this note appears to fit in this category. In a review of the Red Crossbill's common habit of feeding at mineral sources, Tozer (1994) reported that there had been numerous sightings of that species eating wood ash at campsites in Algonquin Park. Ficken (1989) observed that Boreal Chickadees (*Poecile hudsonicus*) selectively fed on wood ash that was much higher in calcium (2580 ppm) than nearby ash (600 ppm), during October at a campground in Terra Nova National Park, Newfoundland. Both Parrot Crossbills (*L. pytyopsittacus*) and Common Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea*) in Finland were often seen to eat "ash from ovens and fireplaces out of doors" (Pulliainen et al. 1978).

The consumption of wood ash by birds may occur more frequently, and among more species, than published observations indicate. Observers should watch for (and report) this interesting behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

- Benkman, C.W.** 1992. White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 27 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim and F. Gill, editors). Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
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- Ficken, M.S.** 1989. Boreal Chickadees eat ash high in calcium. *Wilson Bulletin* 101: 349-351.
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- Pulliainen, E.T., T. Kallio and A.M. Hallaksella.** 1978. Eating of wood by Parrot Crossbills, *Loxia pytyopsittacus*, and Redpolls, *Carduelis flammea*. *Aquilo, Series Zoologica* 18: 23-27.
- Tozer, R.** 1994. Red Crossbills feeding at mineral sources. *Ontario Birds* 12: 102-108.

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CORRIGENDA

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The plant used in Rose-breasted Grosbeak nests was incorrectly identified as *Anemone canadensis*. It was actually White Avens (*Geum canadense*).

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The Greater Shearwater was found at Budapest Park, near the foot of Parkside Drive, east of Sunnyside Beach, on the Toronto waterfront, not "at Budapest Beach, in the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition", as reported.

Backcover

We apologize for any inconvenience to our readers or Kindermann (Canada) Inc. caused by two errors which appeared in the Leica ad. Please note that the \$50 Instant Rebate is no longer offered, and that the Leica website address should be: <http://www.leica.kindermann.com>