

Notes

Pileated Woodpecker eating dogwood berries

by

Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

On 3 September 1994, along with Heather Mackey and Bryan Bertie, we observed a Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) near the Visitor Centre and Lighthouse at Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland County. It was unusually tame around people. The apparent attraction for the woodpecker was the Red-osier Dogwoods (*Cornus stolonifera*) growing around the Visitor Centre. Twice we observed the Pileated perch awkwardly near the top of two dogwoods and eat several berries from each shrub. Ryan (1978) states the fruit of the Red-osier Dogwood is "eagerly eaten by birds". We also learned from Robert Dawson (pers. comm.) that he saw a Pileated Woodpecker eating wild grapes (*Vitis* sp.) near Hamilton in the fall of 1994.

Neither of us could ever remember seeing or hearing about Pileated Woodpeckers eating fruit. A search of the literature revealed some insights into this behaviour. Bent (1939) reports that Pileated Woodpeckers eat mainly wood-boring insects, but supplement their diet with a variety of fruits and nuts including acorns, wild grapes, holly, poison ivy, sumac, hackberry and dogwood. Hoyt (1957) summarizes, "In the fall of the year the pileated woodpecker may be found feeding on

many species of fruits as well as mast in the form of wild nuts". However, we could find only one reference to Pileated Woodpeckers eating dogwood berries in Ontario. Mills (1982) says that "It has twice been reported eating alternate-leaved dogwood berries in the Huntsville region".

We conclude that wild berries are an important part of the diet of Pileated Woodpeckers in Ontario, particularly in autumn.

Why have we not seen this behaviour before? It may be because most Pileated Woodpeckers in Ontario are rather secretive and difficult to observe in their favoured mature forest habitat. However, in recent years this "denizen of extensive forests" has become more visible as it adapts to urban areas and smaller woodlots. Therefore, we would expect more observations of berry-eating behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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Downy Woodpecker eating elderberries

by
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Most species of woodpeckers make some use of plant material (berries, nuts, etc.) in their diets (Bent 1939, Cramp 1985). However, fruit is not usually a major component of the diets of most species. Woodpeckers tend to specialize on insects of various orders and families. There are some notable exceptions to specialized insectivory, however. Some species are quite opportunistic and omnivorous, or even have become specialized on certain plant foods. The Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) is one obvious example of a North American species that specializes on fruits (acorns of various western oaks (*Quercus* spp.)), at least in the winter. Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus* spp.) are noted for their use of sap, and will switch to "... a vegetarian diet ..." when other sources of food become scarce (Lawrence 1966; R.J. Pittaway, pers. comm.). In Eurasia,

the Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) frequently feeds on coniferous tree seeds in the winter, and searches for fruit and nuts on the ground. The Syrian Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos syriacus*) consumes significant amounts of fruit, including species of agricultural value, such as cherries, plums, apricots, almonds, apples, and pears. It is also unique among woodpeckers in feeding fruit to its young (Cramp 1985).

The food sources of North American woodpeckers appear to be less well documented than those of Eurasian species. Bent (1939) and Terres (1982) note examples of the use of fruits in some species, and Iron and Pittaway (1995) describe this behaviour in the Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), in this issue of *Ontario Birds*. Several authors, including Jackson (1970), Kilham (1970), Lawrence (1966), and

Stokes and Stokes (1983), have focussed specifically on the feeding ecology of the Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), but have made no mention of it using plant food, and Bent (1939) and Terres (1982) commented only briefly on the use of plant foods by this species. Therefore, it seems it worthwhile to note an observation of fruit-eating behaviour by a Downy Woodpecker.

On 29 July 1993, the author and Scott Jones were examining a wetland by canoe at the mouth of Stobie Creek, where it enters Lake Huron at Desbarats, about 50 km east of Sault Ste. Marie, Algoma District, when a Downy Woodpecker was observed in a Red Elderberry (*Sambucus pubens*) along the shore. We observed it eating the ripe berries of this shrub for a few minutes, and then we proceeded on along the edge of the wetland. We do not know how long the woodpecker continued to feed on the berries.

Given the variety of plant foods used occasionally by various species of woodpeckers (Bent 1939, Cramp 1985, Terres 1982), it seems likely that any succulent, non-toxic fruit can be used when available. However, only one specific report of the use of elderberry has come to our attention. Cramp (1985) noted that the Grey-headed Woodpecker (*Picus canus*) has been known to feed on Black Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) in Europe.

Undoubtedly, Downy Woodpeckers and other species of woodpeckers feed on fruit more frequently than the literature suggests. This behaviour should be looked for, especially in late summer and autumn, when many shrubs and trees are bearing mature fruits.

Acknowledgements

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Another Dovekie Record from Eastern Ontario

by
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At dusk on 26 October 1993, on the Mississippi River approximately 3 km east of Carleton Place, Lanark County (Figure 1), a small black and white bird was shot as it approached duck decoys. The hunter believed that he had just shot a "Butterball" or Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*). Upon retrieving the bird, however, he realized that it was something quite different. The specimen was brought to Ivan Perry, a local

Carleton Place birder, who identified the bird as a winter-plumaged Dovekie (*Alle alle*). Aware that this was a very unusual record, Ivan then contacted Mike Jaques, another local birder, who donated the specimen to the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. The author prepared a study skin of the specimen.

The specimen was in excellent condition (Figure 2). A few pellets to the head had killed the bird, leaving

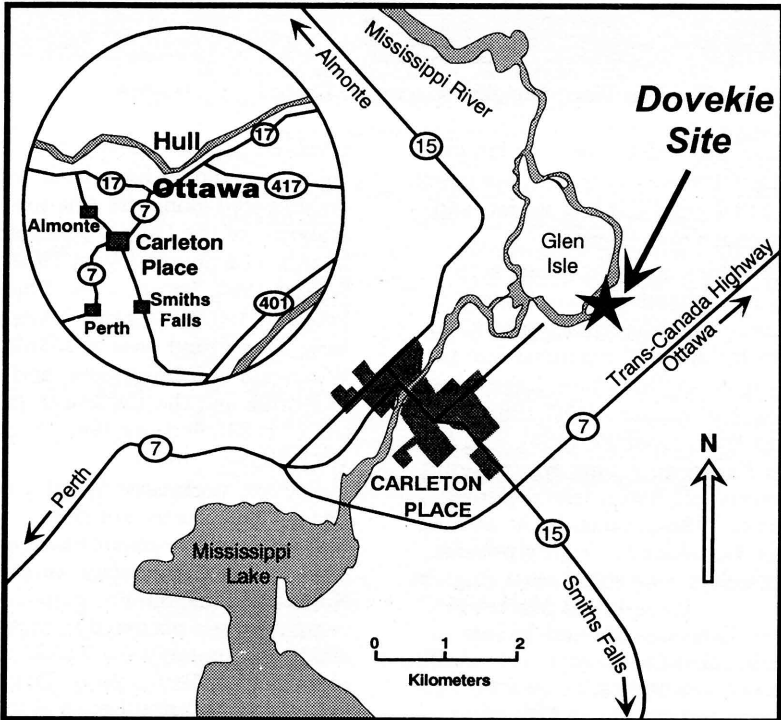


Figure 1: Location of 1993 Dovekie record.

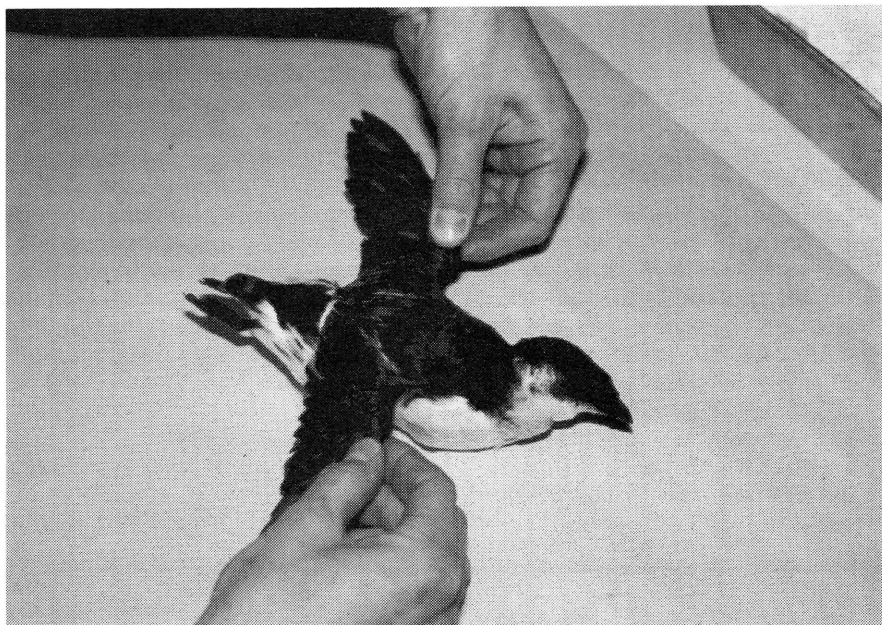


Figure 2: Carleton Place Dovekie specimen. Photo by C. Traynor.

all other parts of the bird undamaged. The Dovekie was very thin, weighing only 118.9 grams. It had no fat, and the stomach was empty.

Dovekies normally range across the North Atlantic Ocean. They breed colonially on cliffs from Greenland east to Iceland and northern Europe, and winter south to New Jersey, the Azores, and France (AOU 1983, Cramp 1985, Godfrey 1986). The first North American colony was recently discovered off Baffin Island (Finley and Evans 1984). Outside the nesting period, Dovekies are highly pelagic. Nevertheless, like some other migrant alcids (e.g., Thick-billed Murre, *Uria lomvia*), Dovekies are also known to occur in inland areas and areas well south of their normal range on occasion. Sometimes, in "invasion years", large numbers of birds are

involved in these inland "wrecks". Such occurrences have been well documented along the Atlantic seaboard of the United States and inland (Murphy and Vogt 1932, Snyder 1953, Sprunt 1936, Veit and Petersen 1993). Vagrant Dovekies have been found west to Manitoba, Wisconsin and Minnesota, and south to Florida and the Caribbean Islands (AOU 1983, Godfrey 1986, Robbins 1991, Janssen 1987).

Severe northeasterly gales in the late fall and winter are cited frequently as the major cause of large inland Dovekie "wrecks" in eastern North America. Similar patterns of vagrancy have occurred in other alcids also, notably the Thick-billed Murre (Tuck 1960). While Dovekies are able to withstand most storms at sea, it has been suggested that

Table 1: Dovekie Records in Ontario

1. Late Oct. 1924: One killed by Mr. McDiarmid on Mississippi Lake near Carleton Place, Lanark County. Mounted specimen was brought to P.A. Taverner by Ted White. Specimen missing. (Fleming 1930)
2. 25 Nov. 1950: One at Toronto. (Baillie 1951)
Sight record.
3. 28 Nov. 1950: Cpl. R.E. Brown reported a Dovekie in the taxidermy establishment of Mr. Ron Cameron, St. Elmo, Roxborough Township, Glengarry County. It had been found dead in Mr. Cameron's yard. At the time of discovery, there had been very high winds. Record on file at Canadian Museum of Nature (W.E. Godfrey, pers. comm.).
Specimen missing.
4. 14 Jan. 1951: One at Toronto (Baillie 1951)
Sight record.
5. 8 Feb. 1955: One found swimming in an apparent weakened condition by G.A. Scott at the Oshawa Harbour. Sight record (Baillie 1955).
6. 11 Nov. 1959: One shot by hunters Whitmarsh and Pollard as it came into duck decoy on Mississippi Lake, near Lake Park. Record on file at C.M.N. Specimen missing (W.E. Godfrey, pers. comm.).
7. 19 Nov. 1963: One found emaciated and dying at Lot 29, Concession 7, Cornwall Township, Stormont County. The specimen was donated to the Royal Ontario Museum. Specimen #93840. It was an immature male, weighing 92 grams.
8. 23 Oct. 1988: One found dying along the shoreline between Port Weller and Port Dalhousie, Niagara Regional Municipality. It was an adult female weighing 87 grams, with no fat and empty stomach. R.O.M. specimen #154509 (Brad Millen, pers. comm.).
9. 26 Oct. 1993: One shot by a hunter on Mississippi River, approximately 3 kms. east of Carleton Place, Lanark County. Specimen donated to the C.M.N. Ottawa. Specimen #96684. Accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee.

prolonged gales may cause their main food source, planktonic crustaceans, to move to greater depths - beyond the diving depth of Dovekies (Cramp 1985). Dovekies weakened by such storm-induced food shortages could be blown inshore and inland. Nevertheless, all large incursions

have not been linked exclusively to severe storm conditions (Veit and Petersen 1993).

The available data suggest that the 26 October 1993 Dovekie record was an unexplained single occurrence. The weather in eastern Ontario between 21 and 25 October

was not unusual (Environment Canada, Atmospheric Environment Service). If there had been severe weather at an earlier date in the North Atlantic, however, it may have blown this bird off course and led to it wandering subsequently to eastern Ontario. No other Dovekie records, or inland records of other North American alcids, during autumn 1993 were mentioned in *American Birds* for eastern North America. Consequently, this Dovekie record does not appear to have been part of a larger "wreck".

All known Ontario records of the Dovekie are summarized in Table 1. (The first eight occurrences have not yet been reviewed by the Ontario Bird Records Committee.) Most records have occurred between late October and late November. Though some records suggest Dovekie occurrences can be directly linked to weather conditions, the remaining records lack sufficient data to determine the exact cause. A number of the Ontario Dovekies have been found dead or in weakened condition. It appears that Dovekies, by the time they reach inland locations, cannot survive in waters such as the Great Lakes, possibly due to the absence of appropriate food or being too weak to feed.

This is the ninth record of the Dovekie in Ontario and surprisingly, the fifth for eastern Ontario. It also represents the first record for the Ottawa recording district (within 50 km of Parliament Hill).

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Pomarine Jaeger: a reviewable species in southern Ontario?

by
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Introduction

The Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) is an annual vagrant in southern Ontario, usually occurring from September through November. In 1994, the Ontario Bird Records Committee announced that along with six other species, the Pomarine Jaeger was no longer on the list of species for which documentation is required in southern Ontario (Bain 1994). The criterion used for this decision was at least 30 southern Ontario reports published in *American Birds* during the five year period from 1988 to 1992 (M. Bain, pers. comm.). This five year review found 35 reports (M. Bain, pers. comm.), but the designated time period included two record years (1988 and 1991) which together provided 23 (40%) of all reports for the decade from 1984 to 1993. (An additional three reports for these two years were reviewed by the committee and found to be unacceptable). This note reviews reports and records of this species for the decade 1984 to 1993 inclusive, and comments on the recent decision by the OBRC to remove Pomarine Jaeger from the review list.

Reports for the period 1984 to 1993 were gleaned from *American Birds* and/or *Birders Journal*. These data were used as an estimate of the maximum possible occurrences of Pomarine Jaegers in southern Ontario during that period. It was assumed that the few observations not appearing in these publications, with

one or two exceptions, were unlikely to amount to substantive records. Records accepted and rejected by the OBRC, and itemized in the annual reports of that committee, were also tabulated. Reports and records (a record being a report accepted by the OBRC) were tabulated by date and locality. Reports submitted to the OBRC but rejected were not used in this summary.

Results

There have been 57 reports of Pomarine Jaeger in southern Ontario (and two in northern Ontario) during the period, for an annual average of 5.7. (A report is considered to be any number of birds seen together; the average number of birds reported at any one time is about 1.7). The OBRC received documentation for 31 reports during this period (only 48% of a total 64, including the seven rejected). This 23% rejection rate is in line with recent annual rejection rates for all species of 25% to 10% (Bain 1993, Bain 1994, Curry 1991). There have been 24 accepted records for southern Ontario during this period, for an average of only 2.4 records per year.

The fall months were divided into thirds, and reports were tabulated on that basis. The peak period of occurrence for all reports (but not individuals) is extended. There was a fairly even spread of reports from 15 September to 15 November, with

fewer in early September and late November. A small peak is evident from 19 October to 11 November, when over one-third of all reports occurred. When individual birds were tabulated they showed a strong peak in early November (strengthened in part by a report of 12 off Van Wagner's Beach, Hamilton, on 1 November 1993; this report has not been submitted to the OBRC).

When localities were reckoned, 38% emanated from the western end of Lake Ontario, with 16% from Lambton County (mainly the Sarnia area), and the remaining 46% from about 13 locales. The vast majority of reports and records concerned juveniles or un-aged birds, and only five reports (8%) concerned adult birds.

Discussion

High numbers of juvenile Pomarines were often reported in years when Parasitic Jaegers (*S. parasiticus*) were plentiful. The main food source for breeding Pomarines is tundra rodents; this species does not breed when lemming numbers are depressed (Maher 1974). Breeding Parasitics feed mainly on passerines, birds' eggs, berries and insects, and also by kleptoparasitism (Maher 1974, Furness 1987). Although bad weather during the northern summer, and weather patterns during migration, may affect numbers of both species reaching southern Ontario, it seems paradoxical that numbers of juveniles of both species would be synchronous.

The reported dates of arrival for Pomarines in southern Ontario also closely follow those for Parasitics. Furness (1987) quotes several sources

in arriving at the conclusion that Pomarine Jaegers arrive at latitude 40-60 degrees North on average three weeks later than Parasitics. Even allowing for a differential in behaviour when reaching Lake Ontario, this indicates that early jaegers are more likely to be Parasitics. These early birds would also arrive at a time when observers are most unfamiliar with their "jizz", making positive identification even more difficult. Early Pomarines do occur in southern Ontario (see OBRC Annual Reports), but misidentifications are likely to be more frequent at that time.

The identification of jaegers is fraught with difficulties. Adults are usually straightforward (although all three are misidentified occasionally!). Juveniles, however, provide one of the most challenging regular identification problems for southern Ontario birders. Observers need to rely heavily on structure and size, the latter often being entirely subjective and the former being much more difficult when the observer does not have comparative experience, but positive identifications should always include plumage detail as well. Large, juvenile, female Parasitics occurring in early September, are prime candidates for misidentification as Pomarines. Observers familiar with Pomarine Jaeger may well wonder what all the fuss is about. Pomarines often impart a jizz more like that of a skua (*Catharacta* sp.) than a jaeger. Pomarine Jaegers are much more likely to catch and kill a seabird, very rarely, if ever, engaging in the energetic acrobatics of Parasitic Jaegers. I have watched Pomarine Jaegers killing or attempting to catch

Sooty Shearwaters (*Puffinus griseus*), Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*), and various alcids. Usually Pomarines will attack these birds while they are resting on the surface of the water, soon giving up the chase once the intended victim becomes airborne.

The total number of Pomarine reports per year (less than six) may translate to less than four reliable records, but even if all 57 had been documented, extrapolation of the rejection rate of 23% would still amount to less than five records per year.

Another factor further obscures the situation in southern Ontario. The high percentage of reports (38%) from the western end of Lake Ontario undoubtedly includes at least some duplication of individuals (cf. the accepted records in the 1993 OBRC report). Certain individual birds are known to have lingered for extended periods in the western basin area, e.g. the "chip" bird of 1990 (Curry 1991).

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Conclusion

These comments have been made to demonstrate that undocumented reports appearing in birding publications (not those reports submitted to the OBRC) may include a number of unidentifiable birds. For Pomarine Jaeger especially, these reports are not a good guide to ascertain whether or not the species should be dropped from the review list. Given the average annual total of accepted records of 2.4, the average annual total of about 5.7 reports, the difficulty of identification of juvenile jaegers, and the possible anomalies in the occurrence patterns of reports, this species may merit reinstating as reviewable by the OBRC.

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