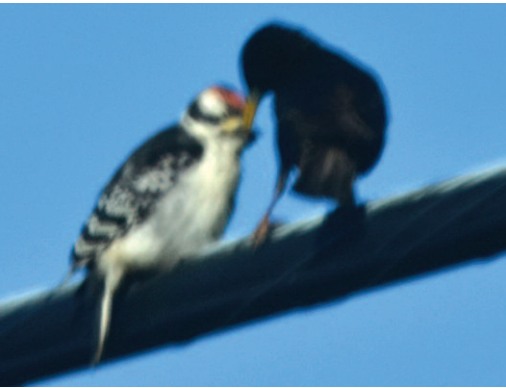


Comment on Burbidge (2018)



Juvenile Downy Woodpecker begging from European Starling. *Photo: Geof Burbidge*

IN A RECENT ISSUE of *Ontario Birds* (December 2018), there was a short paper by Geof Burbidge concerning an observation of European Starlings feeding a fledgling Downy Woodpecker (Burbidge 2018). A couple of reasons were suggested to explain this unusual behavior, but another possibility, not mentioned, is nest piracy, which may then have resulted in a mixed-species clutch.

The term nest piracy, also referred to as nest appropriation or nest usurpation, was first used by Robinson (1985), though the act itself had been described much earlier (Favaloro 1942). It is loosely defined as one bird species appropriating the active nest of another for its own

breeding purposes (Segura *et al.* 2016). On rare occasions, the eggs of the nest's former occupants are incubated by the usurpers, which can result in peculiar and sometimes incompatible broods. For example, in May 2007, a birder here in Minnesota documented a day-old Canada Goose gosling being cared for by a pair of Osprey. The nesting platform had been occupied by the goose, but the Ospreys drove her off upon their return later that spring. The result was that the Ospreys inadvertently incubated a single Canada Goose egg to full term, even bringing the gosling a few fish after hatching. Descriptions of nest competition between Canada Geese and Ospreys are well-represented in the ornithological literature (Fannin 1894, Flath 1972) and I have witnessed a similar interaction between a Canada Goose and a Bald Eagle.

There are many well-known examples of mixed clutches among waterfowl — in both open ground nests and in cavities. I previously have found cavity nests holding mixed clutches which involved some combination of two of the following species: Wood Duck, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser and Common Merganser.

Generally, these cases are attributed to egg-dumping rather than nest piracy, but

without witnessing the event, differentiating between the two is difficult. A non-waterfowl example occurred in 2012, when I discovered a pair of territorial American Kestrels, which returned in the spring to a nest box in northern Minnesota to find it already occupied by European Starlings. The kestrels forced out the starlings and laid their own clutch among them. This resulted in the kestrels incubating a mixed clutch of six European Starling eggs and four eggs of their own. I do not know the outcome of this event, but based on the situation — including the aggressive presence of the kestrels and the absence of any starlings — I concluded this was a rarely reported example of nest piracy.

Starlings usurping the nesting cavities of North American woodpeckers has been described many times in the ornithological literature (e.g., Bent 1939, Howell 1943, Jackson and Jackson 2016), and I would suggest that this might be a plausible explanation for the events described by Burbidge (2018) in *Ontario Birds*.

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