

THE BATTLE FOR THE FISH

On January 22, 1994, I was leading a birding class in the Newburyport area. We were visiting Deer Island, where we had just seen several immature Bald Eagles at a distance. After the eagles took wing, we looked at a small pool of open water in the otherwise frozen river. Several Common Mergansers and a Great Cormorant were fishing in this pool, which was bathed in spectacular midwinter afternoon light.

The Great Cormorant suddenly bobbed up to the surface with a large catfish in its mouth. The fish seemed almost too large for the cormorant to swallow, and the large bird labored to toss the fish around until it was turned head first, suitable for swallowing, into the predator's bill. The still-living fish flailed to and fro while the cormorant dove into the water, attempting to get a better grip on it. The cormorant then crawled out onto the ice, trying to do the same. Minutes passed, and it appeared that the fish might be just too big for the cormorant to swallow.

Suddenly, a Great Black-backed Gull dropped onto the ice and moved toward the cormorant, which quickly returned into the water with the fish. The gull strode over to the edge of the ice and grabbed the tail of the fish, the head of which was still in the bill of the cormorant. The gull then pulled hard at the fish, physically yanking the Great Cormorant entirely out of the water and dragging it onto the ice.

I was about to tell the class that there was no doubt as to who was going to win this contest, when I was preemptively proved wrong. Suddenly, the gull simply let go of the fish. The cormorant slid backward into the water, fish in tow. Only then did I see an adult Bald Eagle swooping down onto the ice, next to the gull. The class and I were mesmerized by the spectacular sight of this eagle coming head-on to us, wings flared back to brake itself as it landed on the ice.

Clearly, the eagle had been perched in a large pine tree across the river from the pool, waiting for just such an opportunity, and sufficiently camouflaged that none of us had seen the bird. The gull had clearly spied the eagle well before we had.

The gull played coy, while the eagle merely looked around. It then dawned on me that the cormorant and fish had disappeared from view. Suddenly, the bird bobbed up to the top of the water once again, with a severe thickening of its throat, and then took a brief drink, half rose out of the water, and shook itself, before it returned to swimming casually. The eagle took off, returning to its secretive perch, and the gull took off shortly thereafter.

The mini-drama had been captivating. Apart from the awesome view of the eagle, what struck me was how powerful the Great Black-backed Gull must be, that it could pull a Great Cormorant entirely out of the water. Only on writing this note did it dawn on me how tough that fish must have been, too.

Paul Roberts, Medford, Massachusetts

THE BIRDS AND THE BURRS

I was birding the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary in Marshfield, Massachusetts, on February 11, 1994. It was about 9:30 A.M., there was little or no wind, and it was snowing. The ground was covered with about two feet of snow from the previous two-day storm. I was walking on the Piggery Loop trail. This area comprises a variety of vegetation; apple trees, honeysuckle bushes, stinging nettle, buckthorn, mulberry, and a crop of common burdock. It was here that I saw a Black-capped Chickadee and a Tufted Titmouse pulling the burr (fruit) off a common burdock stalk. The chickadee flew up to the honeysuckle bush nearby and proceeded to open the burr. At first I thought that the birds were eating the seeds from the burr, but I watched the chickadee as it pecked at the burr with vigor. Most of the burr fell onto the snow-covered ground. I pulled a burr from the burdock and opened it up. The inside appeared to be a woody-segmented rosette with fine hairs. After pulling the rosette apart, I found an insect larva that appeared to be overwintering in a hole bored laterally through the center of a few segments (seeds). I then opened more of the burrs, and in about seventy-five percent of them I found larvae. The chickadee and titmouse were probably feeding on these larvae.

With the help of Phil Perkins from the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, Entomology Department, the larvae were identified as those of the bruchida beetle. These beetles lay their eggs on the developing fruit of a plant. The larvae bore into the seed and eat its contents, killing the seed. When they attack weeds, these beetles can be beneficial; however, agriculturally they can be a pest.

On March 13, 1994, I returned to Piggery Loop and found that the burdock patch had been stripped of almost all of its burrs. The burdock, considered to be a waste plant, provided the chickadee and titmouse a hearty food source this snowy winter.

Frances M. Garretson, Marshfield, Massachusetts