

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKERS RAISING SECOND BROOD

by Marjorie W. Rines

In 1991, still a relative tyro at birding, I was told that there were Red-bellied Woodpeckers in the Middlesex Fells. I had only seen this species a handful of times, and here was a resident pair just a couple of miles from my home. On my first visit I had walked less than 50 yards before I heard one call. There was the male, perched on the edge of a nest hole, and a few days later I saw the female. I spent many hours that spring watching the pair raise their young.

Since then I have watched the Red-bellies every spring, observing their nesting behavior. In 1994, they raised two broods. The problem is, they aren't supposed to do that. According to the literature, they raise only one brood in the northern part of their range (Kaufman 1996, Erlich et al. 1988). It's not surprising; it takes this species 12-14 days to hatch its eggs and 22-27 days to fledge the young after hatching; then the adults may feed the fledglings for as much as six weeks after fledging (Kaufman 1996).

Several years of observation have suggested that the way the parents feed the young can indicate the progress toward fledging. At first, the parents enter the nest to feed them. Around two weeks after the hatching date, the parents begin to feed from the edge of the nest. When the babies poke their heads out of the nest hole, they are usually within four days of fledging.

My notes for June 6, 1994, describe both adults feeding young, which were poking their heads out of the nest hole. On July 16, I watched the adults again bringing food to the nest hole, and on July 31 I watched them feed at the nest hole, but also saw a juvenile bird nearby. In 1995, on June 2 the female fed from the edge of the nest. Additional June trips resulted in no activity, but on July 25 both adults were seen feeding young from the edge of the nest hole. In 1996 my June notes read "young fledged approx. 6/10, second brood in progress 6/29, saw juv bird in area." On July 20 the male entered the nest with food and left. On August 22 I observed the female feeding a fledgling.

There were three active nests in the Fells in 1997. Nests #1 and #2 were only 100 yards apart, and initial fledging dates were presumably shortly after two visits when I saw young in the nest holes: May 28 for #1, and June 15 for #2. When I next checked on July 8, there was no activity at nest #1, but at #2, I was surprised to see the male arrive with food and exchange places in the nest with the female. There were also two juvenile birds in the immediate area. If the pair at #2 were raising a second brood, this would mean an egg-laying date of no later than June 26, just 11 days after the earliest possible fledging date for that nest.

I speculate that the adults from #1 took over nest #2. Red-bellies are extremely tidy nest builders, creating nearly perfectly round holes, but by July 8, the nest #1 had slightly worn edges, making me wonder whether some other animal had started using the hole. If that were the case, pair #1 might have usurped nest #2 while pair #2 were busy feeding fledged young. There was no evidence at nests #1 or #3 of any possible second brood.

When I told a friend about the double-clutching Red-bellies, he said it was impossible, and suggested that the pair possibly lost their first brood, leading to a second nesting attempt. The presence of juvenile birds in the area could be explained by a second pair successfully raising a first brood. After five years, however, circumstantial evidence suggests these woodpeckers are definitely raising two broods.

One explanation is simply that this is an aberrant pair that hasn't read the literature. A second explanation is possible, however. Red-bellies have been increasing in Massachusetts at a dramatic rate (see the article by Jackson and Davis in this issue). Is this increase the result of pairs like those in the Middlesex Fells that are rearing two sets of young each season? Or does it suggest that the species' range is moving north? If so, Massachusetts may no longer represent the northern extreme of its range, and hence raising more than one brood may be more "normal." This somewhat circular set of alternatives reminds one of the old query "which came first, the woodpecker or the egg?"

References

- Ehrlich, P.R., Dobkin, D.S., and Wheye, D. 1988. *The Birder's Handbook*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kaufman, K. 1996. *Lives of North American Birds*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

1998 NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

The **7th Annual North American Migration Count (NAMC)** will be held on May 9, 1998. The NAMC is a nationwide bird census with results compiled by county and state. The NAMC is like a Christmas Count in that it includes counting all birds seen or heard on a given day. Unlike a Christmas Count, the NAMC:

- Is a nationwide count held on one day (2nd Saturday in May)
- Has entire counties as count areas (instead of 15-mile diameter circles)
- Costs participants nothing
- Occurs in warm weather!

The goals of the NAMC include:

- Obtaining a "snapshot" of the progress of Spring Migration
- Compiling information on the abundance and distribution of each species
- Creating challenges and goals among birders while collecting useful information
- Having fun!

The organization of the program, compilation of results, and reporting of data are done entirely by volunteers. The Count has grown since its inception to the point that the 6th Annual NAMC in 1997 had more than 7,000 observers spread across all the states and most of the Canadian provinces. In New England, the 1997 Count had more than 500 participants, providing coverage in over 45 counties. Highlights (and lowlights) of the 1997 NAMC in New England included:

- Continued expansion of the **Red-bellied Woodpecker** throughout much of the region
- Very low numbers of **neotropical migrants** due to the late spring
- **Moorhen** numbers remaining alarmingly low
- Rarities such as an **Arctic/Pacific Loon** in Essex County, MA, and a **Kentucky Warbler** in Middlesex County, MA.

A summary of the New England portion of the 1997 Count will be published in an upcoming issue of *Bird Observer*.

What effects will our warm El Nino-influenced winter have on the 1998 Count? Will the warm weather even further increase the numbers of southeastern colonizers like Fish Crows, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and Hooded Warblers? If you would like to participate this year on May 9 to help answer these questions, or just to have a fun day of birding near the peak of spring migration, contact one of the count's New England coordinators:

New England NAMC Coordinators

New England - Regional Coordinator:

Mike Resch, 978-433-8896

(MRESCH@ENSR.COM)

Massachusetts - County Coordinators:

Essex - Rob Lewis, 617-524-6006

Middlesex - Jim Barton, 617-354-7435

Worcester - Richard Hildreth, 508-429-5085

Suffolk - Robert Stymeist, 617-926-3603

Nantucket - Edith Andrews, 508-228-9529

Hampden - Seth Kellogg, 413-569-3335

Hampshire - Anne Lombard, 413-586-7509

Bristol - Emily Brunkhurst, 508-223-3060

Barnstable - Stauffer Miller, 508-362-3384

New Hampshire - County Coordinators:

Rockingham - Dick Balerviez, 603-778-9385

Cheshire - David Rowell, 603-924-8790

Grafton - Sue Fogleman, 603-536-1541

Maine - State Coordinator:

Maurice Mills, 207-726-4494

Rhode Island - State Coordinator:

David Emerson, 508-822-7430

Connecticut - County Coordinators:

Fairfield - Frank Mantlik, 203-854-9780

Litchfield - Chris Wood, 203-355-3716

Hartford - Jay Kaplan, 860-693-0157

Middlesex - Wilford Schultz, 203-265-6398

New Haven - Pat Leahy, 25 Mountain View Rd., Bethany 06524

Windham - Tom Harrington, 860-423-2041

Vermont - County Coordinators:

Bennington - Bonnie Dundas, 802-447-7433

NW Vermont - Mark LaBarr, 802-434-3068

Contact **Mike Resch** if you would like to organize efforts in a county that does not have a Coordinator!