

FIELD NOTES

Visiting Baby Vultures

Marjorie Rines

Working for Massachusetts Audubon Society's Help Line, I have received telephone calls that are routine, amusing, baffling, and downright mystifying. On July 28, 1999, I received a call about nesting Griffin Vultures. I explained that this species has never been seen in North America, so it seemed unlikely that a pair was setting up housekeeping in Bristol County. The caller had seen them clearly, at close range, however; the two birds featured the distinctive bald head of a vulture, but with white plumage, and after reviewing a number of references, Griffin Vulture was the closest match.

A couple of days later, I received another telephone call from the man. Somewhat sheepishly, he conceded a mistaken identity. They were Turkey Vultures, but these were nestlings showing plumage that he had been unable to find in any reference book. When I looked at the enormous library available in the office, I sympathized. I could not find any reference to the plumage of nestling Turkey Vultures, either.

Turkey Vultures are relatively new breeders to Massachusetts, with the first recorded breeding in 1954 (Veit, R. R. and W. R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*, Lincoln, MA: Massachusetts Audubon Society). Since then, Turkey Vultures are commonly seen during the summer and are undoubtedly breeding regularly, but nests are rarely




Photograph by the author

found (*Ibid*). I was dying to see the nest, so I asked if he would be willing to share the location, and he gave me detailed directions to the nest site. On my next day off, I went to look for the nest. Following his directions, I parked near a large reservoir, and followed the path beside the water. I located the nest site without too much difficulty, and was surprised that it was only a short distance from the water (perhaps 100 yards), and visible (with difficulty) from the well-used path.

The nest had evidently been built in the crevice of an outcropping of red rocks. When I first approached, two young birds were perched on top of one of these rocks. As I neared, one of the young jumped down, and disappeared into a crevice, quite

possibly the actual nest. The other remained where it was. I was not willing to investigate where the first bird had gone, partly because I did not want to distress it unnecessarily, but also for — well — hygienic reasons (baby vultures, when disturbed, are known to use regurgitation as a defense).

The remaining young bird tolerated an extremely close approach without showing any signs of distress. It was the size of an adult bird, with well-developed wing and back feathers. The naked pinkish-gray head was a startling contrast to a rather Edwardian ruff of white down around its neck, on its breast and belly, and surrounding the top of its legs.

Although the nestling showed no evidence of distress, appearances can be deceiving, and I also did not want to prevent the parents from taking care of the young, so I left rather quickly, but not without taking photos. 

Bushwacking Hawks

David Larson and Susan Carlson


In the winter we watch and census our backyard birds for Project Feederwatch (Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology). Other, perhaps more avid watchers of our backyard include the local accipiters. Every winter we have at least one Cooper's Hawk and one Sharp-shinned Hawk visiting regularly. Normally, these accipiters stage slashing aerial attacks on flying or perched prey. However, on two separate occasions (some years apart and involving different birds), we have observed Sharpies engaged in an interesting alternative hunting behavior.

One side of our yard is a tangle of multiflora rose, and its protection and proximity to feeders make it a favorite gathering spot for the local flock of House Sparrows. On both occasions, Sharpies have flown into the yard, perched lightly on the multiflora, and then proceeded to clamber down into the bushes in a teetering walk, disappearing entirely under the snow-covered branches. We have assumed that this was a hunting maneuver; the bushes are thick and large enough so that the hawks were obscured quickly. On neither occasion did we see the birds reappear, although they could have left unobserved from the far side of the tangle. This behavior seems like a poor, clumsy, and slow way to hunt small and agile prey. Nevertheless, this strategy must work sometimes, else why would two different birds have used it?



Looking for lunch in the authors' yard

In fact, hunting on foot may be more widespread in accipiters than we thought. A description of foraging strategies in Cooper's Hawk suggests that they "... may even pursue prey into dense underbrush on foot" (from the Cornell Birdsource website: <http://birdsource.cornell.edu/pfw/Abundance_maps_pfw/coohaw/mappage.html>). Recently we observed just such a behavior when an immature Coop landed on the lawn, five feet from that multiflora tangle, paused briefly to look around, and then ran rapidly into the brush. After about twenty seconds, the Coop popped up to the top of the brush, perched briefly, and flew off, unfortunately without a sparrow reward. We have frequently seen buteos and harriers on the ground, and they seem clumsy and awkward in that mode. Perhaps the long legs of accipiters allow for more graceful foot travel, as is the case for their cousins the caracaras.

Just when you thought it was safe to hide in the bushes 



American Kestrel nestlings — photograph by Joey Mason