

SYMBIOTIC STARLINGS

by Bruce A. Sorrie, Quincy

On April 24, 1975, I was with a small party of people including Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Petersen and Ms. Mary Cartung, sightseeing in Cades Cove, Tennessee. This is an area noted for its rich soil and early settlement by farmers, and the pastoral nature of the cove stands in marked contrast to the surrounding mountain terrain. Although now part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cades Cove still supports resident farmers, and small herds of cattle are a common sight.

At the western end of the loop road through the cove, we stopped to watch a Woodchuck (Marmota monax) feeding in the lush grass, when someone exclaimed "Look at that Starling!" Behind us lay some resting cows, one of which had a Starling (Sturnus vulgaris) perched upon its head. That was unusual enough, but the bird appeared to be picking about the animal's hide for food!

For the next two minutes or so we watched as the Starling moved in a deliberate manner about the ears, eyes, snout, and top of head, making obvious probing and picking movements with its bill in a manner which to us could only have been interpreted as feeding behavior. The bird concentrated its efforts at the bases of the ears and in the immediate vicinity of the eyes. What it obtained from the cow can only be surmised, for even with 7X binoculars we could not see the food items. Moving around the cow's great head proved to be no problem for the Starling; it never faltered or slipped, nor did the cow in any way attempt to dislodge the bird. Other Starlings in the pasture fed near cattle, but none alighted on the beasts.

Presently the Starling flew to another part of the pasture, but returned within a few minutes to the same cow, showing no hesitation to hop right back onto the animal's snout. This time it was soon joined by another bird, that fed atop the back of the cow's neck. We observed the birds for a few minutes more, took a few photographs for confirmation, then left.

Bizarre as this incident may seem, it is apparently not without precedent. Trevor Lloyd-Evans of the Manomet Bird Observatory assures me that he has seen references in European journals to symbiosis in starlings. Certainly, in the U.S. such behavior is rare enough to warrant mention here. Few birds indulge in true symbiotic behavior, but it is most interesting that the two species most specialized in this form of feeding are the oxpeckers of Africa, both members of the family Sturnidae, to which our Starling belongs.

NEW ENGLAND HAWK WATCH

The New England Hawk Watch is looking for volunteer observers in eastern Massachusetts for the fall 1976, migrations. The purpose of the Hawk Watch, now six years old, is to trace old migration routes, locate new ones, and record the volume, variety and patterns of raptor migration. Thus many volunteers are needed to establish as many observation posts as possible throughout eastern Massachusetts. Observers will be asked to devote one day, or more if possible, to manning a hawk observation station where they would record all raptor movements. A coordinated New England-wide observation program will be conducted on the week-ends of September 18-19, September 25-26, October 2-3, and October 30-31, so volunteers are particularly needed for those dates. However, since relatively little is known of raptor movements in eastern Massachusetts, individuals who would be able to devote any other time to observation will be most appreciated.

If you have an interest in hawks and would like to participate, but do not feel confident in making identifications of migrating raptors, you may still make a significant contribution to the "watch." We can station beginners with more experienced observers who would benefit from the assistance of another pair of eyes scanning the sky and be able to offer tips on identification. Anyone wishing to participate is asked to contact Paul M. Roberts, 24 Pearson Road, Somerville, Mass. 02144; telephone (617) 776-8566.

Volunteers should note if they have a particular observation site which they would prefer to use or if they would be willing to staff a recommended station. Any information or advice individuals might have regarding good observation points, traditional migration routes, patterns or dates, or personal counts made in previous years will also be much appreciated.