

FEEDING BEHAVIOR OF SOME MIXED SPECIES OF BIRDS

By C. Brooke Worth

On my farm in Cape May County, New Jersey, I placed wild bird seed on a fixed line between two poles where occasionally I set up a mist-net. Most of the time there was no such interference, and a regular clientele established itself. The feed-line was on the lawn, and I could watch through a window without being observed.

The most abundant visitors were Brown-headed Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds, though there were also numerous Common Grackles, Slate-colored Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, Cardinals, Evening Grosbeaks, Blue Jays and Carolina Chickadees. Occasionally a few Mourning Doves appeared, and a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers became daily attendants. All told, there were often at least two hundred birds feeding along the net lane, some forty feet in length, so that one would have to regard conditions as definitely over-crowded.

In these circumstances one could readily see which bird species dominated other species. It would be natural to imagine that Grackles and Blue Jays would take precedence over the others, but that was not the case. To my astonishment I observed that other species invariably gave way before Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Mourning Doves. Perhaps woodpecker dominance is really not so hard to accept when one remembers what they can do with their bills. These two birds--a male and a female--simply moved about on the ground as if they were the only feasters there. If a Grackle had not stepped out of the way, I think they would have bumped right into it.

Mourning Doves, on the other hand, would seem to have little means for self-protection. They took their high place in the mixed hierarchy by aggression. Each one insisted on a clear arena about it, and whenever a bird of some other species encroached, the dove would rush at it with lowered head and partly-spread wings. Why the others tolerated this, rather than deflecting the threat, is a debatable question. It might have been because there was actually plenty of food for all, though I doubt they could have reasoned that out. Perhaps Mourning Doves are tougher than they look. Possibly a "surprise element" was involved, the spectacle of a challenging dove being so ludicrous that stronger birds were thrown off their normal patterns of response.

Unfortunately, I did not see an encounter between a dove and a woodpecker.

"Blackbirds" mixed together indiscriminately, while sparrows and cardinals seemed only little involved in the competition owing to their lessened activity during the brightest hours of day. The nine Evening Grosbeaks that stayed here for about three months always came in

boldly enough, and might even fight back momentarily if jostled by a Cowbird or a Redwing, but they seemed to have little bellicosity in them and yielded their positions after only a feint or two.

Blue Jays, Chickadees and Red-bellied Woodpeckers all carried sunflower seeds to solid perches in order to crack them, the former two species selecting twigs and the woodpeckers resorting to tree trunks. As might be suspected, woodpeckers had a difficult time in the vertical position. Blue Jays and Chickadees could actually stand on a seed as they pecked at it, but woodpeckers had no such purchase. They had to use their feet simultaneously for both clinging and seed-holding, and in addition their feet seemed to be set so far back that they could barely get their heads down to them. During ordinary feeding, woodpeckers locate food directly before their faces. The female first solved this problem by finding a convenient crotch in which she could lay a seed to peck at it. However, the seed sometimes popped out, and then she would dismally resume the awkward posture on a tree trunk. Eventually both birds learned to wedge seeds in bark crevices where they could attack them in a frontal maneuver.

Incidentally, I obtained a foreign recovery, duly reported to the Fish and Wildlife Service, but since our superiors in Laurel, Maryland, are often slow in forwarding information, I should like to hear from any EBBA News reader who may have banded the following bird: Brown-headed Cowbird, adult male, 68-157468, netted April 18, 1966, and released in perfect condition.

R. D., Delmont, New Jersey



Above are photos of two birds banded at Hacienda La Victoria, San Ramon (Chanchamayo), Peru by Frank P. Frazier, Jr. where he is now living and raising chickens (Ralph Bell please note!) and calves. At right is a Tody-Flycatcher (*Todiostrostrum cinereum*) and at left a Barred Antshrike (*Thamnophilus doliatus*).