

SEPARATION OF A DEPENDENT BLUEBIRD FLEDGLING  
FROM ITS PARENTS AND BROODMATES

By Benedict C. Pinkowski

Young songbirds acquire the ability to undertake sustained flights more or less simultaneously with the establishment of self-feeding and independence. In some hole-nesting species, where nest departure occurs later than for open-nesting species and the young fledge in a more mature condition, independence and self-feeding may follow the acquisition of flight proficiency by several weeks or more. In the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), for example, extensive flights are possible only a day or two after the nestlings fledge (18-21 days after hatching), but the young remain together with the parents for another 3 or 4 weeks. During this time the adults, or at least the male if a new nest is begun, continue to feed the young. Even after the juveniles are independent, they typically remain in close association with one another for several more weeks or months.

During the spring of 1973 I obtained an unusual recovery of a fledgling Eastern Bluebird. On 27 May I banded five 15-day-old young in a nest box located near Washington, Macomb County, Michigan. On 31 May I returned at 1140 to check the box and found one young inside and four others in various places near the nest; all apparently fledged earlier that morning. After determining the band number of the remaining nestling, I closed the box and continued to observe the birds from a distance. This last young left the nest almost immediately (at 1146), and flew 155 feet to a dense stand of pines before it fluttered to the ground.

Both parents were seen feeding all five young in the area of the nest box on 13 June. On 15, 17, and 20 June I observed the two parents and only four young in the area. The fledglings begged to the parents for food as late as 20 June, and judging from the intensity of their hunger calls, at least some were still being fed up until that date (they were hidden and out of view, thereby making sight records difficult).

The whereabouts of the fifth young which had vanished between 1745 on 13 June and 0845 on 15 June was not determined until some time later when I learned that it had been recovered exactly 13.5 miles south of the banding site. Interestingly, the bird which disappeared turned out to be the last young that had departed from the nest on 31 May. The recovery date was 16 June, which agreed with the timing of the disappearance of one young from the family group. However, the departure preceded by 5 days the complete establishment of self-feeding and independence by the remaining fledglings.

The general condition of the bluebird at the time of recovery was described by those who examined it as "...exhausted and weak, with one wing noticeably injured; it was too small in body proportions and tail length to be fully grown and completely independent." It was not tame, nor were any of its feathers tattered, indicating that it had probably

not been caged or otherwise transported or subjected to handling by humans (my initial suspicion). It actively tried to flee when pursued, although with its injured wing it was easily captured by hand.

The circumstances surrounding this recovery strongly suggest that the wayward bluebird was somehow separated from its parents and the other members of its brood prematurely, that is, before it attained independence. Owing to its condition at the time of recovery, survival would have been very unlikely. This would have been suspected anyway because of its disappearance at such a young age, especially when its broodmates remained in the care of their parents for another 5 days.

Separation of a fledgling from its parents probably occurs more often than we realize, but there are few documented instances of the circumstances and outcome of such an event. Obviously young birds which have reached a point in their development where they are capable of strong, sustained flight but are still dependent on their parents for at least part of their nutritional needs are most vulnerable in this respect. In multi-brooded species the instinct of a parent to accompany an isolated juvenile may be offset by territorial attachment, as well as the stimulus of other young which remain behind.

There are many possible causes which may isolate a single fledgling in a case like this. I can think of the following: attack by predators, including birds of prey; sudden human activities in the area occupied by the family group (e.g., motorcycles, which were common in the area of this nest); excessively aggressive behavior by the parents, other members of the same species, or individuals of other species; violent weather conditions or storms; and almost any unusual disturbance at night which might cause the bird to leave its roosting site and fly aimlessly into the darkness.

Acknowledgements -- Not many of us are fortunate enough to have such "complete and thorough coverage" of a recovery as I did in this case. The bird was discovered and captured by Margaret Hillert and Lynn Allnutt; banders Ruth Erickson and Mary June Wolcott examined it and reported the recovery. This note would not have been possible without the diligence of all these persons.

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POPULATION ESTIMATE FOR THE AMERICAN  
KESTREL IN THE GREAT VALLEY SECTION OF PENNSYLVANIA

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Introduction

An American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) population was evaluated for a period of one year (September 1973 to September 1974) in a study area of the Great Valley. Seasonal population trends, nesting densities and spatial relationships were determined. The information gained from the study area was then extrapolated for the entire Great Valley of Pennsylvania.