# NOTES

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## INTERSPECIFIC FEEDING OF NESTLINGS BY A NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

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Birds feed offspring other than their own typically when their nests are parasitized (e.g., by cuckoos or cowbirds) or as conspecific (usually related) helpers at the nest (e.g., as occurs in the Florida Scrub Jay, *Aphelocoma coerulescens*). Much less common is the occurrence of interspecific feeding of offspring in other nests (Shy 1982). We recently observed a brood of Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) being fed not only by both parent birds but also by an adult Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*).

On 8 June 2006 we visited a suburban neighborhood on Old Village Road, Tallahassee, Florida, to investigate a report by Mrs. Fran Buford of a mockingbird feeding wren chicks. We were shown the nest of a Carolina Wren, with four nestlings, in a hanging basket of white begonias (Fig. 1) in a shaded yard within a few m of a house. The chicks were only a few days from fledging. We had watched the nest for only about 10 min when an adult wren approached the nest, fed a chick, removed a fecal pellet, and flew off. Shortly afterwards, when an adult Northern Mockingbird approached the nest carrying food, both parent wrens gave alarm calls. The mockingbird then fed a wren chick (Fig. 2) and removed a fecal pellet. Ten minutes later, an adult wren again fed one of the chicks. Some 30 min later, the mockingbird again fed a wren chick, although this time no alarm calls were heard from the parent wrens. Shortly afterwards, we found an active nest of Northern Mockingbirds in a crape myrtle bush (*Lagerstroemia* sp.) with four small, early stage (*ca* 5 days old) chicks in the same yard, no more than 10 m away. We presume that this was the nest of the mockingbird seen feeding the wrens, as we observed no territorial disputes with other mockingbirds.

The reasons for a bird to provide interspecific care are difficult to understand, as there is no selective advantage to the caregiver. Such interspecific feeding may provide the helper with experience for future breeding attempts (Trombino 2000), but that explanation seems unlikely in this case, as the helper was already breeding. We think that it is most likely that the proximity of the two nests led to this example; in addition, the interspecific feeder may have been the male of the pair of mockingbirds, feeding the wrens while his mate was brooding his own chicks. If the mockingbird chicks experienced no selective disadvantage as a result, then the trait may persist, but negative selection pressure may explain why such observations are rare.

### LITERATURE CITED

SHY, M. M. 1982. Interspecific feeding among birds: a review. Journal of Field Ornithology 53:370-393.

TROMBINO, C. 2000. Helping behavior within sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus* spp.). Wilson Bulletin 112:273-275.

**Figure 1. Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) feeding chicks in a suburban yard in Tallahassee, Florida.**

**Figure 2. Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) feeding Carolina Wren chicks in the same nest shown in Figure 1.**