

LETTERS

DO FALCONS BUILD NESTS?

Except for excavation of the egg cup, falcons are not now generally believed to build nests (L. Brown and D. Amadon 1968, *Eagles, hawks and falcons of the World*, McGraw-Hill, NY:839 and 842). The best (albeit indirect) evidence for nest building in the genus *Falco* is G. L. Richards' (1970, *Condor* 72:476) report that captive American Kestrels (*F. sparverius*) arranged wood chips that had been placed near the scrape during incubation. Although many old publications make reference to falcons refurbishing nests (e.g., G.P. Dement'ev and N.A. Gladkov 1954, *Birds of the Soviet Union*. Vol. 1. Moscow State Publishing House, Moscow, Russia), few recent references do so (e.g., J. Cupper and L. Cupper 1981, *Hawks in focus: a study of Australia's birds of prey*. Jaclin Enterprises, Mildura, Australia).

I know of only one detailed published account of any falcon actually bringing nest materials to the eyrie (J.C. Barber 1979, *Raptor Res.* 13:16). Because I urged Barber to publish the record *if* he could retrieve the stick, I am partly responsible for the original publication and feel obligated, for the record, to contest the published version of that observation. I visited the Prairie Falcon (*F. mexicanus*) site in question with John C. Barber (JCB) on 7 April 1976, eleven days after he made the reported stick delivery observation. On that visit, I learned: (1) that this was the first Prairie Falcon eyrie JCB had ever visited, (2) that JCB was unaware until my visit that Prairie Falcons were not known to build nests, and (3) that the stick was not taken to the eyrie as JCB later reported in print, but rather it was deposited on a ledge over 30 m from the true eyrie which we located on 7 April.

If the object actually was a stick (versus the dangling tail of a prey item), a likely explanation for its transport to the cliff is not as nesting material as JCB asserted. Rather, it is much more likely that the falcon inadvertently clutched the twig while grasping prey. I have repeatedly seen other raptors clutch a stick or clump of grass along with prey and subsequently fly with vegetation trailing.

An unquestionable observation of a large falcon transporting nesting material (alone, without prey) to its eyrie would be truly remarkable, but JCB's account is not of that quality and should no longer stand uncontested to confuse students of raptor behavior.—David H. Ellis, U.S. National Biological Survey, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD 20708 U.S.A.

OSPREYS USE BALD EAGLE NESTS IN CHESAPEAKE BAY AREA

Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) and Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) share similar breeding habitat in the Chesapeake Bay area and elsewhere. The nests of these species are similar in size and appearance. Ospreys typically build large stick nests in dead trees or on man-made structures (C.J. Henny et al. 1974, *Chesapeake Sci.* 15:125–133; A.F. Poole 1989, *Ospreys: a natural and unnatural history*, Cambridge Univ. Press, NY), while Bald Eagles usually build larger nests in live trees (P.B. Wood et al. 1989, *J. Wildl. Manage.* 53:441–449; Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources, unpubl. data). Osprey nests are usually placed in the open at the top of dead trees or structures, while Bald Eagle nests are usually beneath the tree canopy obscured from view. Both select nest sites close to large bodies of water or wetlands (J.M. Andrew and J.A. Mosher 1982, *J. Wildl. Manage.* 46:383–390; Poole 1989). Eagles nest earlier than Osprey; in the Chesapeake Bay area eagles are on eggs when Ospreys return in March.

Since 1977, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources has monitored all known eagle nests in the state by aerial survey. Starting in February of each year, nest sites were monitored for activity at 3–4 wk intervals ending in early June. Since 1977, 449 nests were monitored totaling 1971 known outcomes.

During the 1991 aerial survey, a pair of Ospreys was observed at an unoccupied Bald Eagle's nest in Kent County, Maryland on 25 March. During the next survey flight, on 26 April, the Osprey pair was standing on the nest and two eggs were noted in the nest cup. On 30 May, an adult Osprey was observed in incubating posture on the nest. One young was in the nest on 9 June.

The nest we observed was built by a pair of Bald Eagles and was first used during the 1980 breeding season (Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources, unpubl. data). It was used by eagles each year through 1989, with the exception of 1982. The eagles nested successfully in six of those years, producing a total of 12 young. In 1985, gypsy moth

(*Porthetria dispar*) defoliation killed the white oak (*Quercus alba*) in which this nest was located. The eagles continued to nest in the dead tree for the next four years, then built an alternate nest 0.5 km away and used it in 1990 through 1993. The nest in the dead tree was used by Osprey in 1991 but not thereafter.

This may be the first published case of Ospreys successfully using a Bald Eagle's nest for nesting, although the reverse has been reported (J.C. Ogden 1975, *Wilson Bull.* 87:496–505). A search of the literature found no reports of Ospreys using eagle nests. While numerous raptor species are known to utilize the nests of other raptors (A.C. Bent 1937, Life histories of North American birds of prey. Part I. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 167. Washington, DC U.S.A., R.S. Palmer 1988, Handbook of North American birds. Vol. 4. Diurnal raptors (parts 1 and 2). Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT U.S.A.), we could find no documentation of Ospreys exhibiting this behavior. Sergei Postupalsky (pers. comm.) observed Ospreys nesting in abandoned Bald Eagle nests a few times in Michigan but never published these observations. Several of the nests were used for a number of years by Osprey, but in one instance a pair of eagles repossessed the nest.

Only two other instances of Ospreys nesting in Bald Eagle nests in the Chesapeake Bay area are known. Jackson Abbott (unpubl. data) reported an Osprey sitting in the very deep egg cup of a Bald Eagle's nest in Kent County, Maryland in 1969, but did not follow up on the outcome of this attempt. Bald Eagles had used the nest the previous two years. In the early 1970s, Mitchell Byrd (pers. comm.) observed a Bald Eagle in apparent incubating posture at a nest in Middlesex County, Virginia that was subsequently abandoned. The nest was then occupied by Ospreys in the same year who successfully raised young. Additionally, there are anecdotal reports of Ospreys nesting in Bald Eagle's nests in the Chesapeake Bay area (Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources, unpubl. data), but there was no specific evidence that the nests were built or used by Bald Eagles.

The use of Bald Eagle nests by Ospreys for nesting is rare as indicated from monitoring hundreds of eagle nests in the Chesapeake Bay area since the 1960s. Since 1977 in Maryland, unoccupied Bald Eagle nests were available 695 times as potential nest sites for Osprey with only one actually used. Many of these nests were in live trees and probably not open enough for Osprey use. The presence of nesting Bald Eagles in an alternate nest nearby could also have reduced the availability of some of these nests to Osprey. However, many nests appeared suitable for Osprey with no eagles nearby but only the one unoccupied nest was used.

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BONELLI'S EAGLE (*HIERAAETUS FASCIATUS*) KILLING A BLACKBUCK (*ANTILOPE CERVICAPRA*) FAWN

On 12 September 1992 at 0900 H, a Bonelli's Eagle (*Hieraaetus fasciatus*) was scanning a grassland plot in the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary in Nannaj, District Solapur (71°41'N, 75°56'E) of Maharashtra, India. After about 40 min, the eagle attacked a blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) fawn entering a scrubland adjacent to the grassland. The eagle repeatedly struck the fawn with its talons, frequently flying 15–16 m away to gain momentum prior to striking. Over a period of 35 min, the eagle caught the fawn five times and struck in 17 times. The first four times the fawn was caught it escaped, probably because the eagle thought it was dead. Finally the bird seized the prey by the neck, standing on it with wings open to maintain balance. After killing the fawn, the eagle stood beside it for a few seconds and then flew off, possibly because of my close proximity. After 15 min, the eagle returned and ate about one fourth of the fawn after first removing the alimentary canal from the ventral side. M.K. Ranjitsinh (1989, The Indian blackbuck. Natraj Publ., Dehradun, India) reported the average weight of blackbuck fawns at birth as 3.27 kg ($N = 33$).

Like other "booted" eagles, the Bonelli's Eagle did not use its beak while killing the fawn. The fawn had talon scratches on the neck region that were bleeding, but there was no injury to the eyes. During the episode described above the eagle's beak was used only four or five times when the bird lost its balance while standing on the fawn.

On a second occasion, on 27 November 1992, a Bonelli's Eagle was seen feeding on a blackbuck carcass which I had put out to bait wolves. The eagle fed on the carcass for 30 min.