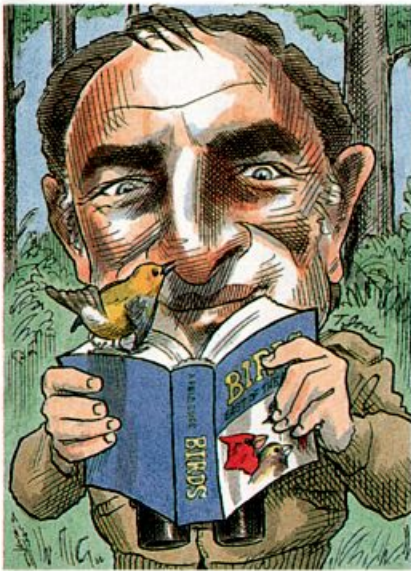


Paul R. Ehrlich

Garbage Birds

After an exciting season of ticking new birds off, suddenly you find yourself living in an avian garbage dump.



I THINK I FIRST HEARD THE TERM “garbage bird” from my good friend Jared Diamond, shortly after he lured me into becoming a dedicated birder some five years ago. It was not an epithet applied to House Sparrows, European Starlings, pigeons, Herring Gulls, or some other avian species notorious for feeding on human leavings. Rather he used it in the sense of the true twitcher—referring to birds he could easily see in his neighborhood, such as Bewick’s Wrens and Phainopeplas. They were still new and fascinating to me, but old hat to him. Indeed, as we have birded together since then our use of the term garbage bird has evolved. If we have driven a hundred miles and then worked hard for several hours to get a lifer, we invariably refer to the second individual of that species as a garbage bird.

But unless you are fortunate enough to live someplace like a species-rich tropical forest in Peru, the chances of seeing a lifer on any given day in your home locality quickly approaches zero. After an exciting season or so of ticking new birds off, suddenly you find yourself living in an avian garbage dump. I think it’s at this stage that most people start becoming really interested in birds. Some who, like me, have an overdeveloped instinct for collecting turn to a proliferation of lists—state lists, county lists, backyard lists, year lists, birds seen while walking with Aunt Tillie lists, and so on.

I can relate to this, since more than forty years of butterfly chasing and

the last half decade of determined bird listing haven’t diminished my collecting instinct. Furthermore, listing, with careful records of dates and localities, can provide interesting information on changes in bird distribution, abundance, migration patterns, and so on. Such data are going to be all the more important as continuing urbanization, tropical deforestation, wetland losses, climate change, acid precipitation, ozone depletion, releases of toxic chemicals, and other human assaults on the environment have their inevitable effects on bird populations.

But refining lists is just one way to

enjoy a world of garbage birds. Another is to concentrate on learning more about bird behavior. There are many books that can provide guidance in doing this, especially the three fine volumes of bird behavior by Donald and Lillian Stokes and *The Birder’s Handbook* which I wrote with David Dobkin and Darryl Wheye. (All authors like to plug their own books!) But while these books can give you ideas on what to look for and help you to interpret what you see, all that is really necessary is a sharp eye, some patience, and pencil and paper to record your observations.



DARRYL WHEYE

A good strategy is to pick out a local species of garbage bird and simply see how much you can find out about it. What kind of habitat is the bird found in? Where does it build its nest and what is the nest made of? How do pairs divide up the chores of nest construction? How many eggs are laid? How long does it take them to hatch? Which parents assume the duties of incubating the eggs and caring for the young? What kind of food do the parents bring the chicks? And so on.

Very little is known about how these behaviors vary from place to place for most North American species. And for a surprising number, the answers to some of those questions are not known for the species at all. For instance, ornithologists are not sure whether Pie-billed Grebes or White-throated Sparrows are always monogamous, whether the female Sage Thrasher helps build the nest, who builds the nest in Western, Summer, or Hepatic tanagers, how Orange-crowned Warblers divide up the care of the young, what sorts of mating displays Scott's Orioles, Green-tailed Towhees, or Chipping, Brewer's, Field, or Le Conte's sparrows employ, or how long it takes the eggs of Lawrence's Goldfinch to hatch. A search for question marks in the summary lines of the *Birder's Handbook* can show you where information is badly needed. If every active birder took one local garbage bird as a focus of interest over a period of years, many of the gaps in our understanding of the biology of North American birds would be filled.

Occasionally, garbage birds can really surprise you. Where I live, the Scrub Jay is one of the most common species. Like other jays, it is beautiful and bold, and has a well-earned reputation as a nest robber. But that reputation had not prepared me for an incident I observed one day as I was approaching Stanford's Biology Laboratories—behavior that I mentioned in my last column. An immature European Starling flew by pursued by a Scrub Jay, which knocked it to the ground. The jay pinned the starling with a foot and leaning backward to avoid its pecks, repeatedly hammered the starling's head with its closed bill. The young starling seemed doomed, until an adult starling intervened, "mobbed" the jay, and gave the

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youngster a chance to escape. A few days later, my colleague John McLaughlin (who at the time was co-teaching an ornithology course with me) observed a similar incident in the same vicinity. This time the young starling's escape was facilitated by mobbing Brown Towhees, an adult starling, and an Acorn Woodpecker! About the same time, a few hundred meters from the site of the first two attacks, a student in our class, Sunia Yang, saw a jay knock a Cliff Swallow down near its nest and attack it in a similar manner. In this case the swallow managed to squirm free when the observer approached to within a couple of yards.

The three attacks raised numerous questions that remain unanswered. Had a single jay become an unusually aggressive predator, or were the three attacks carried out by different individuals? None of us had observed this sort of behavior in Scrub Jays before, although attacks on prey capable of flight are occasionally reported in other species of jays and seemingly unlikely predatory behavior is occasionally reported in other passerines. For instance, in the Caribbean, Pearly-eyed Thrashers use their bills to attack White-crowned Pigeon nestlings, leaning back as the jays did to avoid the squab's defensive thrusts. A Common Myna has been seen to carry out a jay-like attack on a Purple Martin in Florida, and Brown-headed Cowbirds have been reported launching a pecking assault on a junco. How common is such behavior? How did

it evolve, especially in species that are not habitually nest robbers?

Equally intriguing is the question of what motivated the other birds to intervene to defend the juvenile starlings. The behavior of the adult starling could simply be a case of parental defense of an offspring. But why would towhees and an Acorn Woodpecker spend their energy saving a starling? Conceivably, the behavior could be explained in the same way that attacks by small birds on a hawk or owl are usually explained. That is, the mobbers are trying to get a dangerous predator to move along and leave their area. But local passerines do not ordinarily mob jays. Perhaps these attacks were some sort of general response to the starling's distress calls.

Whatever the explanation, it is clear that we still have much to learn about the behavior of Scrub Jays and the responses of birds to the presence of predators and to predatory acts. Someday I hope to interest a student in doing a systematic study of Scrub Jays, with special emphasis on individual-to-individual variation in feeding habits. Understanding what's going on will clearly involve catching jays in traps or mist nets and giving them colored bands so that different individuals can be recognized in the field.

Meanwhile, I carry compact binoculars with me every day as I walk to and from my office—almost two miles each way. California Thrashers usually enliven my morning, and in the winter there are flocks of Golden-crowned Sparrows and Cedar Waxwings. Bushtits and Chestnut-backed Chickadees can be spotted in mixed-species foraging flocks; Red-tailed and occasionally Red-shouldered hawks soar, call, and display overhead, and I've watched a Cooper's Hawk make a kill. The ping-pong ball song of Wrentits can be heard for much of the year, and once in a while I see one skulking in shrubbery planted in front of a neighbor's house. I never tire of watching these and other local garbage birds, and I hope you never will either.

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