

NOTES

FLICKER DESTROYS VACANT CLIFF SWALLOW NESTS

ERIC V. JOHNSON, Biological Sciences Department, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California 93407

During the winters of 1994–95 and 1995–96, over a dozen Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) nests on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, were totally destroyed. The nests, originally built about 9 m from the ground on Fisher Science Hall, were knocked down, leaving clods of dried mud on the pavement below and only the outlines of the nests under the overhang where they were built. In the first case, a student told me he had seen a Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) destroy them. In the second case, a fellow faculty member unfamiliar with bird identification described what could only have been a flicker doing the damage. On 11 December 1996 I witnessed a flicker (sex undetermined) attacking nests in the same location as the previous years. At 11:00 AM the bird flew in from an adjacent building, which later proved to have two destroyed swallow nests, and landed in typical woodpecker posture on the first of 11 nests under an overhang. To the unaided eye, there were no obvious insects or other prey items on the nests. The bird proceeded to strike the side of the nest below the opening several times with its bill, showering the pavement with large chunks of dried mud and opening a hole about 15 cm across into the nest's interior. Its movement were indistinguishable from normal flicker tree-trunk foraging. I was unable to determine whether it obtained anything to eat. After about 20 sec it moved to the next nest in line and repeated the behavior. After visiting a third nest and partially destroying it, the flicker flew away. On 31 December 1996 I returned to the building and noted that all 15 nests on this site (11 on one wall, 4 on another) had been completely destroyed, and the shattered remains were on the ground.

Neither Bent (1939) nor Moore (1995) mentioned this as a foraging tactic for any flicker, and Brown and Brown (1995, 1996) did not record any flicker damage to Cliff Swallow colonies. Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) have been noted drilling holes in nests (Brown and Brown 1995), Acorn Woodpeckers (*M. formicivorus*) removing eggs after enlarging or destroying the necks of nests (Fajer et al. 1987), but these activities took place during the breeding season. Possibly, the bird in question has, in the past, been rewarded for this behavior by obtaining food, though flickers' diets are primarily ants (Beal 1911), and the lateness of the season of these observations probably precludes an infestation of ants in the colony due to broken eggs or dead chicks. In the winter, nest boxes in coastal San Luis Obispo County frequently contain small numbers of a species of bumble bee (*Apidae: Bombus*), as well as occasional wax brood chambers containing grubs of these insects (pers. obs.). Additionally, there are sometimes maggots (Diptera, probably Calliphoridae) and beetles (Coleoptera). All of these might also occur in vacant Cliff Swallow nests and represent potential prey (Beal 1911).

An additional possibility arises from the fact that flickers, especially in western North America, are known to damage buildings by pecking holes in cornices, cupolas, eaves, and walls for nesting or roosting places (Beal 1911, Bent 1939). If this bird was attempting to excavate a roost hole, it must surely have been frustrated by the insubstantial nature of the substrate.

NOTES

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SOOTY TERN REACHES THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA

ROBERT W. DICKERMAN, Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131

KEVIN WINKER and DANIEL D. GIBSON, University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-6960

From 4 to 16 September 1997 two of us (Winker and Dickerman), representing the University of Alaska Museum and with the cooperation of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and the U.S. Coast Guard, conducted an intensive survey of the early-fall avifauna in the Massacre Bay area of Attu Island, the westernmost of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. The Coast Guard operates a Long Range Navigation (LORAN) Station there (at 52° 50' N, 173° 11' E), which for decades has formed part of the primary source of marine navigational information for the North Pacific. Its 650-ft tower probably provides a biologically insignificant hazard to birds but does cause some mortality.

Supplementing our work on the local breeding landbird species, we searched nearly daily beneath the tower cables, where we found the feather remains (usually without bones) of birds that had hit the guy wires and that had been consumed or partly consumed by scavenging Arctic Foxes (*Alopex lagopus*) or Norway Rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), the former introduced long ago by Russian explorers and the latter introduced either by these same explorers or by later visiting ships, American or Japanese.

Tower casualties that we discovered during this period included two Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*), 12-15 Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels (*Oceanodroma furcata*), one Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), one Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*), one Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*), and a headless "black and white" waterbird—a featherless trunk skeleton with both attached legs and feet and both attached wings. Only the proximal half of one wing was feathered, but we found some associated, unattached primary remiges and other feathers. We collected these