

GENERAL NOTES

A Catbird helper at a House Wren nest.—Despite the thoroughness of the recent review of the subject of helpers by Skutch (1961. *Condor*, 63:198–226), it may be well to record the behavior of a Catbird (*Dumatella carolinensis*) that fed nestling House Wrens (*Troglodytes aëdon*) during the period of incubation of its own eggs. The location was Bloomington, Indiana.

Catbirds have been known to feed fledgling Cardinals (*Richmondia cardinalis*) (Brooks, 1922. *Bird-Lore*, 24:343–344) and a fledgling flicker (*Colaptes* sp.) (Hayward, 1937. *Wilson Bull.*, 49:47), while young House Wrens have been tended by an Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) (Forbush, 1929. "Birds of Massachusetts and other New England states," 3:420–421). Nevertheless, the present case seems especially interesting in that an open-nesting bird brought food to nestlings in a cavity, behavior for which Skutch (loc. cit.) seems to have only one clear parallel. In the latter instance, an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*), a bird which does sometimes nest in situations approximating cavities with large apertures, fed nestling Tree Swallows (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) in a bird house (Deck, 1945. *Nature Mag.*, 38:241–242, 272). Also of interest in the interspecific relationship reported herein is the disparity in sizes of the two species.

We are indebted to Mrs. Angela Beatty, who called the incident to our attention, permitted us to observe and photograph the birds from her windows (Figure), and generously supplied many of the following details.

On 12 June 1961, Mrs. Beatty noticed a Catbird alighting on a wren house suspended 10 feet above the ground on the support of an awning. Information we acquired later indicates that on this date the box contained nestling House Wrens a few days old and that the Catbird was a female just completing the laying of a set of four eggs in a nest about 5 feet away. Mrs. Beatty's efforts to frighten the Catbird from the box were unsuccessful, and the bird persisted in its interest until 14 June, when it became necessary to move the wren house to make way for painters and carpenters. In its new position on a porch railing, the box was 3 feet from, and at the height (6 feet) of, the Catbird's nest, which as yet was undiscovered by Mrs. Beatty. At about this time Mrs. Beatty first noticed that the Catbird was feeding the young wrens. Although the adult wrens gave no noticeable signs of anxiety, Mrs. Beatty tried repeatedly to scare away the Catbird. She was unsuccessful; indeed, its feeding visits seemed as frequent as those of the wrens.

When we first watched the wren house, for nearly an hour on 15 June, the Catbird was still bringing food, on an average of about once every 10 minutes. It was often accompanied by a noticeably larger Catbird whose size (Forbush, op. cit., 3:322) and frequent song led us to believe that it was a male and therefore that the food-carrying bird was a female. At all times, whether with or without food, the smaller bird engaged in nearly constant fluttering of its half-drooping wings, in this respect resembling a fledgling begging for food. When a parent wren arrived with food and found the helper at the nest box, the wren perched quietly several yards away until the larger bird left. Once the Catbird brought food while an adult wren was in the box, and we believe that we saw the item transferred to the adult rather than fed directly to a nestling. Later that day Mrs. Beatty saw the Catbird jerk its head from the hole of the wren house as though it had been pecked by an adult wren.

By 17 June, the Catbird's visits with food had become much less frequent; e. g., we saw four trips in 150 minutes, beginning at noon. It was at this time that we discovered the Catbird nest, in an ornamental bush so impenetrable that we could not see into it in order to correlate the Catbird's attentive periods on its own eggs with its visits to the

wren box. Twice, however, when we pulled the branches aside the Catbird was incubating, and the evidence suggested that it was now spending most of its time on its own nest and carrying food to the wrens as it returned at the end of inattentive periods. There were two other developments of 16 and 17 June: Both Catbirds now sometimes chased the wrens when they met them; and the nestling wrens did not always accept the items brought by the Catbird, which then usually left with the food after 30 to 60 seconds at the wren house. Wing-quivering continued to mark the smaller Catbird's behavior, and at times it or its supposed mate called *chuck* in the immediate vicinity of the wren house.



A few days later, Mrs. Beatty found the wren house on the ground below the railing, and when she attempted to hang it in a new position the young wrens left it. The noise of the departure of the wrens brought a Catbird to the scene, but no attentiveness to the fledglings was noticed. Shortly after this, the Catbird eggs hatched, and the young ultimately left the nest.—VAL NOLAN, JR., *Indiana University*, and RAYMOND SCHNEIDER, 2805 Headley Road, Bloomington, Indiana, 21 December 1961.

Meadowlark killed by electric fence.—In early September 1955, near Waterman, DeKalb County, Illinois, I discovered an Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) hanging by one foot from the corner of a fence row. The dead bird was suspended from a brace wire running from the top of the corner post to the ground at the next post. About two inches from this wire was a fence wire carrying a pulsating six-volt shock alternated with a twelve-volt shock every sixth time. The extra strong sixth shock of this popularly named "weed burner" fence is for the purpose of burning off plants that would normally grow up around the fence and short it out. The bird was apparently shocked and killed when attempting to step from the grounded brace wire to the electric wire. The foot, by which the bird was hanging, was badly scorched and the mark of the wire was embedded in the flesh of the toes. The free-hanging foot was badly burned; two toes remained intact. The bird probably died instantly because when I moved it the attached foot fell free; had the bird struggled much it would certainly have fallen from the wire.—JAMES TATE, JR., *Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois*, 16 October 1961.