

THE MANNER OF FEEDING FLEDGLING WOODPECKERS

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APPARENTLY very little has been published concerning the manner of parental feeding of fledgling woodpeckers, although there are more data on the feeding of nestlings. Many of the latter observations are based on the motions made by the adult as it fed the concealed young from the cavity entrance.

In 1964 from 20 May through 9 June, I watched a pair of Downy Woodpeckers (*Dendrocopos pubescens*) with their brood of three fledglings (one with red on the crown, presumably a male (Forbush, 1927:61)). They came to a feeding station a few feet from house windows where they fed the young on a dead tree which provided a completely unobstructed view of all actions.

At 5:30 PM on 20 May, the female arrived with a large fledgling in female plumage which rested on a horizontal branch of the dead tree while the parent took several bites of suet, then flew to the fledgling. As the adult waited beside the youngster, the latter pecked at her bill several times to secure the food. This procedure was repeated a number of times at this feeding, always in the same manner. Not once was the adult's bill inserted into the mouth of the fledgling nor were its mandibles noticeably parted. No begging posture or gaping occurred. The fledgling sometimes pecked the bark as the parent gathered more food.

This manner of feeding is similar in some respects to an observation made many years ago (9 August 1941) when a female Yellow-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) and a large fledgling fed on our lawn. The details were written for my file at that time. The adult hunted food, followed by the vociferous fledgling which was fed several times. When ready to feed, the adult opened her bill slightly, gave several rapid forward movements of her head while the fledgling poked its bill into hers from the side, near the base of her bill. On one occasion, the adult worked on what appeared to be a cicada pupa case, pounding it with her beak to remove the hard shell. She made several attempts to swallow it before she got it down. Immediately afterward, she offered a feeding to the youngster. The first item that it received was the cicada which it attempted to swallow. When it did not go down immediately, it was rejected and thrown a few inches. Feeding at the mother's bill was resumed. At termination of the feeding, the adult retrieved the cicada and swallowed it (Laskey, 1943).

In 1964 the Downy Woodpeckers with their brood of three came regularly to feed at the dead tree. At every feeding, the pecking method was used. On 21 May the female fed the fledgling male on suet; on 25 May she shelled

sunflower seeds taken from a suspended glass jar. She poked a seed into a bark crevice, pounded off the hull, then carried it in her bill to a female fledgling which pecked it in small bites from her bill. Later that day a fledgling fed itself suet by clinging to the wire container, but the female continued the feedings several times a day.

On 27 May the adult male arrived with the fledgling male, fed him by the same pecking method, then the female arrived, chased her mate, fed the young male herself, then fed one of the females, mainly on hulled sunflower seeds. The male parent was never seen taking a sunflower seed. Later in the day the mother arrived with the two females. She chased one, fed the other.

Feedings were mainly given by the female, but on the first of June, the family of five came together. By 6 June the parents were noticeably ignoring the young and only occasionally gathering food for them to peck. On this date the young male gave the adult call, and flew at his sisters. On the following day (7 June) a female fledgling gave the adult call. On 9 June the female gave a sunflower seed feeding to a female, the final one for the brood.

On 10 June the young male helped himself to a sunflower seed from the glass feeder, placed it in a crevice where the mother had hulled most of them, was unsuccessful in hulling it there, tried several other crevices unsuccessfully, then flew off with it.

In 1965 two sets of parent Downy Woodpeckers carried suet from the same dead tree to their broods, one flying east, the other to the west. In late May the fledglings were being fed there by this same pecking method.

This manner of feeding fledgling woodpeckers may be more common than is indicated in the literature, but I have been unable to find any similar observation. It is contrary to the published accounts of nestling and fledgling feeding. It has value in leading fledglings to independence by practice in pecking for their own food. When hand-raising young of several other species, I have noticed that there is often a transition period when gaping to the forceps or finger gives place to pecking the food as it is offered, which is soon followed by pecking on the ground and independence.

Bent (1939) has compiled a number of reports by various observers on the manner of nestling feeding by several species of woodpeckers. Most of these report regurgitation, some without actually seeing the contact of bills between parents and nestlings, but based upon the motions of the adult outside of the cavity.

Concerning the Downy Woodpecker, Bent (op. cit.:57) states: "How the young are fed in their earliest days has not been determined," then he quotes A. A. Allen: "Certainly by the time that the young are 4 or 5 days old entire insects are brought in the parent's bill; I have photographic proof of this."

Reporting on flickers, Roberts (1932:666-667) states that they furnish the best opportunity for studying the "stab" method of feeding the young. He also calls it the "pumping" method, a practice common to woodpeckers and hummingbirds.

Bent (op. cit.:275) quotes W. Brewster that flickers are fed by regurgitation, stab method, and states that I. G. Wheelock (p. 290) reports a western race fed by regurgitation. Sherman (1910) watched flickers feed nestlings inside the nest box. She stated "they secure the parent's bill and suck." She also stated the young grasp the parent's bill from the side. Terres (1960) described the feeding of two flicker fledglings on a lawn. They assumed the begging posture of crouching with open bills before the female parent who fed each in turn by thrusting her bill into their mouths. In 1949 a brood of four was brought to me when their nest tree was cut. At first they gaped but they soon learned to peck food as offered.

Pileated Woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*) are also reported as feeding by regurgitation by B. Christy and I. G. Wheelock (Bent, op. cit.:180 and 193). Roberts (op. cit.:670) states that large nestlings are fed by the stab method exactly like flickers. He saw a full-grown fledgling being fed for several days by regurgitation by a worn female. However, he shows photographs (p. 665) of a female flicker with a large feeding of insects in her bill at the nest cavity and a Pileated Woodpecker (p. 668) with an insect in the bill. In both photographs, the young have heads protruding from the nests with mandibles parted.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) is reported by A. DuBois as fed by the "poking" method and I. G. Wheelock reports regurgitation for a western sapsucker (in Bent, op. cit.:131 and 147).

Concerning the Hairy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos villosus*), C. Bendire states that feeding is by regurgitation as does Wheelock for a western race (Bent, op. cit.:16 and 34).

L. Achilles is quoted on the Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*): "Once in a while grubs could be seen in their bills, but from the actions of the birds when feeding their young, they appeared to be regurgitating" (Bent, op. cit.:110).

A study of parental feeding in the woodpecker family offers challenging problems for fieldwork.

SUMMARY

A manner of fledgling-feeding by two species of woodpeckers, not previously described, and which is contrary to those considered typical for the species was observed for Downy Woodpeckers and Yellow-shafted Flickers.

In 1964 (20 May through 9 June) a pair of Downy Woodpeckers fed three large

fledglings by allowing them to peck food from the adult bill. In 1965 two pairs of Downy Woodpeckers fed their fledglings in the same manner.

In 1941 a large fledgling Yellow-shafted Flicker took food from the mouth of the mother.

Details of feeding are given and published data on feeding of young by a number of observers for a number of woodpecker species is reviewed.

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