
News, Notes, Comments

A Seed-addicted Wintering Ovenbird

On 17 Sep 2005, I banded with USGS band 1821-37564 a hatch-year Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) approximately 250 m south of my Tallahassee home in the strip of second-growth woods between my yard and an interstate highway. Judging by the 77.5 mm recorded length of its unflattened wing, the individual presumably was a male (Mulvihill et al. 2004). On 3 Oct, I recaptured the bird at a location nearby, but on 6 Dec, I netted it near my home. At this time, the Ovenbird apparently had selected my backyard and the edge of the adjacent woods as its wintering home range. This was evident from several recaptures until 5 Apr 2006, and the bird's return for wintering in the subsequent seasons 2006/2007 and 2007/2008.

On 3 Feb 2006, I observed the Ovenbird on the patio at the back of my home as it walked back and forth, picking something up here and there. This habit would become the bird's signature by which I could ascertain its presence during three long winter seasons. Occasional recaptures further confirmed the bird's identity.

I searched in vain for likely prey among the scattered leaves and pine needles on the usually poorly maintained patio surface with moss growing between the pebbles embedded in the concrete. One day, however, I noticed the bird drop a hull of one of the millet seeds that I had scattered on the patio to feed wintering sparrows. This was a lucky break because usually the bird appeared to swallow everything it picked up. In fact, the Ovenbird typically showed up after a rain when the seeds were soft and, as I now suspected, could be eaten whole. I confirmed this by offering presoaked seeds placed close together and watching the bird eat one after another. On those rainy days, the Ovenbird often visited at least twice; and on one occasion I counted 31 pecks from the time I had discovered it on the patio. Seeds, therefore, sometimes made up a considerable portion of the daily diet. Once I saw my Ovenbird pick up some wet moss as well, but I could not tell whether anything was swallowed.

For me, an Ovenbird on a seed diet was a revelation. Luckily, Therese Donovan, the coauthor of the Ovenbird monograph in the *Birds of North America* (Van Horn and Donovan 1994), had forwarded an inquiry about my patio-visiting Ovenbird to Allan Strong from whom I learned about his investigation of the foraging strategy of Ovenbirds wintering in Jamaica (Strong 2000). His analysis of regurgitation samples had shown that seeds were a variable, and in some habitats substantial, component of their diet.

Because the Ovenbird observed by me took advantage of the availability of seeds on a quite regular basis, the bird's choice of my backyard for wintering in three successive years must be attributed at least in part to this unusual but predictable nutritional resource. Who knows, the Ovenbird may return yet another time.

LITERATURE CITED

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