Wild Birds Unlimited® Nature Shop

Summer 2012

BIRDTracks®

Eastern and Spotted Towhees

by DR. DAVID BIRD

Spotted Towhee.

For the other bird watchers on our early morning bird walk, the "bird-of-the-morning" was the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, but for me it was the Spotted Towhee. What a sharp-looking bird, and certainly one of the prettier and more easily identifiable sparrows! The black contrasting with the rust, white spots, and red eyes in an otherwise dull wintry landscape on a rainy, chilling morning in suburban Colorado Springs truthfully took my breath away. You see, back in my region those sapsuckers are a dime a dozen, but towhees are somewhat rare.

Territoriality

Although North America is home to several towhee species, the two that best represent the continent are the Eastern Towhee, aptly named for the East, and the Spotted Towhee in the West. Until 1995, these two species were lumped together under the name "Rufous-sided Towhee," but genetic studies proved them to be two separate species. Nevertheless, they do hybridize in a fairly narrow zone in the Great Plains, which can make things challenging for bird watchers in Nebraska and the Dakotas.

Both species are migratory, but this can vary from population to population. The Eastern Towhees inhabiting the northern parts of their range are more likely to head south in the fall, but some individuals try to tough it out, especially in milder winters and at locations that offer shelter and readily available food such as backyard feeders. The picture for the Spotted Towhee is a little messier, with some being fully migratory, some partially so, and others non-migratory.

Habitat

In all parts of their ranges, Spotted Towhees favor habitats with a wide variety of plants, but you can best expect to find them in places with shrubs, brushes, thickets, and tangle only a few yards tall. They especially like to root around in habitat with plenty of litter and humus on the ground shaded by protective canopy of foliage and twigs overhead. Eastern Towhees frequent the same kind of habitat in the East, but they are not as fussy in their preference for dryness compared to their western counterpart. Interestingly, it has been suggested that this light-dappled kind of habitat may

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News on the Fly

Bird News and Discovery

by DAVID BIRD

Bermuda Petrel Reaches a New Milestone

Once thought to be extinct, the Bermuda Petrel (or Cahow) is not only alive but doing rather well in its namesake country, where it is celebrated as the national bird. Its wild population has just reached a major milestone: 100 pairs! This nocturnal, ground-nesting bird was quite abundant more than 500 years ago, but the introduction of cats, dogs, rats, and pigs, as well as hunting by human settlers on the island, took their toll. Many believed that the bird had been driven to extinction; however, in 1951, 18 nesting pairs were discovered on several small, rocky islets in Castle Harbour. With the small colony's annual reproduction rate of only seven or eight chicks per year—not enough to sustain the population's numbers—an intensive recovery program was initiated in 1961. Serious predator control, installation of artificial nesting burrows, and increased public awareness led to a major population comeback. Citing a record production of 56 fledged chicks in 2011, the goal of the Department of Conservation Services is to increase the nesting population to at least 1,000 pairs. Occasionally this species can be seen off the coast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

BIRD TRIVIA:

Bird Records from the Bird Almanac:

- The lowest altitude for nesting is held by the Little Green Bee-eater at 1,307 feet below sea level on the shores of the Dead Sea.
- The highest altitude for nesting is held by the Himalayan Snowcock at 15,000 feet.
- The most northerly nesting bird is the Ivory Gull at the edge of the pack ice 400 miles south of the North Pole.

Backyard Café

The Many Joys of Sunflowers

by KEVIN J. COOK

The wildlife garden cannot grow too many sunflowers because wildlife cannot get enough of them. The *Compositaceae*, the most diverse family of flowering plants in the world, understandably appeals to wildlife.

Botanists recognize at least 23,000 species in the sunflower family. The diversity ranges from ragweeds to lettuces, asters to artichokes, sagebrushes to marigolds.

A unique set of species grows naturally in every geographic nook and cranny, and from this it logically follows that the local wildlife utilizes the local sunflowers. So, incorporating sunflower abundance and diversity into your yard plantings makes good sense from the wildlife garden perspective. These are the main benefits.

- **Pollinators.** The large, showy typical sunflowers attract a startling array of insect pollinators. Beetles, flies, bees, wasps, moths, and butterflies all visit for a meal of either pollen or nectar. Many of them are unbelievably colorful, challenging the beauty of the finest hummingbirds and warblers.
- **Ranchers.** Certain ants deliberately place aphids on sunflowers. The aphids suck the plant fluids, concentrate the carbohydrates and excrete them as sugar-rich liquid—the famous "honeydew," which the ants then collect as food.
- **Builders.** Thistles produce floss so mature fruits can disperse by wind. Some portion of thistle heads never fully open and they retain their floss through the winter. Goldfinches, plus some vireos, warblers, and sparrows, collect floss to line their nests.
- **Diners.** Some birds eat the seeds from the shelled, single-seeded fruits. Some insects, especially grasshoppers, graze on sunflower leaves. Some birds watch the sunflowers to feed on the pollinators and the grasshoppers.

And so I repeat: You cannot grow too many sunflowers.

Plant sunflower species common to your area. Horticulturally bred cultivars often fail to produce seeds, and their brilliant flower colors often fail to attract the wild pollinators, which can be very finicky. Leave spent seed heads intact rather than deadheading—the birds will continue to gorge on the seeds well into the fall and winter.

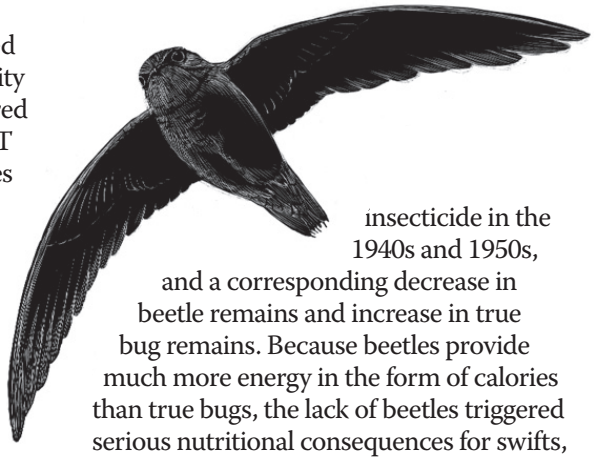
Diversify the species and amplify the numbers of each that you plant, and watch your garden blossom with more than flowers.

Sunflower seed—particularly black-oil sunflower seed—is sure to attract cardinals and other backyard regulars.

WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED

Chimney Swift Decline Related to Beetle Kill-Off by DDT

A team of Canadian scientists headed by Dr. Joseph Nocera of Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, has uncovered a link between the rampant use of DDT in the 1940s and '50s to serious changes in the insect diet of Chimney Swifts, a species listed on Canada's endangered species list. They achieved this by digging into a 2-meter-deep pile of swift poop—or, as ornithologists like to call it, guano—that had accumulated over many decades in a chimney attached to Fleming Hall at Queen's University in Kingston from 1928 to 1992. The chimney had been used during that time by roosting Chimney Swifts—up to 4,000 at one point. The layers of the guano, containing a vast amount of indigestible insect remains, were analyzed for both levels of DDT and insect parts. It revealed the steep rise in the use of DDT as an



insecticide in the 1940s and 1950s, and a corresponding decrease in beetle remains and increase in true bug remains. Because beetles provide much more energy in the form of calories than true bugs, the lack of beetles triggered serious nutritional consequences for swifts, and likely for other aerial insectivores as well. As a result, Chimney Swift populations dropped sharply, to a level from which they may never fully recover.

Killing One Owl to Save Another

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is contemplating an experimental program in which they would kill or transfer Barred Owls that have expanded their range westward into that of the Northern Spotted Owl. Found mostly in British Columbia, Oregon, Washington, and California, Spotted Owls have been listed as a threatened species since 1990. Although the loss of old-growth forest has been cited as a major cause of the species' decline—40 percent in the past quarter-century—the larger, more aggressive, and generally more adaptable Barred Owls have been displacing the Spotted Owls, including disrupting their nesting, competing with them for food, and even killing them outright in some cases. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to shoot and/or capture between 257 and 8,960 Barred Owls to see if the Spotted Owl numbers will bounce back. The high end of this range represents 0.2 percent of the North American population of Barred Owls and only 6.5 percent of its population that overlaps with the Spotted Owl's territory. Depending on public reviews, the program could start in 2013 and last up to 10 years.

JULIE ZICKEFOOSE

Frequently Asked

Q's

by Kevin Cook

Q: Robins are the most common birds in my neighborhood, so I see many of them in my yard and enjoy watching them. I've noticed they rub their bills frequently, but I can't figure out why.

A: Lacking both napkins and opposable thumbs to manipulate napkins, robins—and other birds—need some alternative way to clean their bills, for two reasons.

First, when a robin preens it acquires oil by rubbing its bill against its oil gland, which protrudes like a stubby nipple near the base of its tail. The bird then transfers the oil to its feathers by wiping and working them with its oily bill. After preening, the robin wipes its bill against leaves or twigs to remove leftover oil.

Second, as a robin feeds it often gets food debris, such as fruit pulp or earthworm slime, stuck to its bill. By wiping the bill against a perch, the robin removes the food debris.

Q: I have a flowering crabapple tree that robins really like. I've noticed that a robin will hop about the tree to select specific crabapples. After swallowing a few, the robin will just fluff and sit for a while, then repeat the feeding and the fluffing and sitting. Is this typical feeding behavior?

A: With a good food supply such as your crabapple, a robin can feed efficiently, expending a minimum amount of calories by just sitting. But it's not just sitting; it's processing its food.

After swallowing a few crabapples, a robin's crop and stomach will be full. As it sits in place, it passes food from stomach to intestine to colon, from colon to rectum, from rectum to cloaca. It then eliminates unusable waste.

Passing a few droppings allows the robin's food to move along in the body, eventually freeing space at the upper end, in the crop and the stomach. At that point the bird is ready to eat again. So, yes, what you have noticed about robin feeding behavior is perfectly normal.

Q: During summer I see robins scattered, one here, one there, but during winter I see them bunched up in small flocks. I would think that in winter, when food is harder to find, flocking would be a competitive disadvantage.

A: Winter flocking can be explained from several ecological perspectives.

- Birds will congregate where food is abundant and easily found. When food is abundant, the time and effort to defend that supply are too costly in terms of daily calorie needs. Basically, it's better to eat more and quarrel less.
- Many birds foraging in flocking proximity are more likely to discover food supplies large enough that at least several birds, if not the whole flock, can benefit from the find.
- Feeding in winter means less cover and more exposure while foraging, which trigger the concept of safety in numbers. Being part of a flock reduces individual vulnerability to predators.

Taken collectively, these factors make flocking worthwhile.

The Backyard Watcher

10 Fascinating Sights to See in Your Summer Backyard

by BILL THOMPSON, III

10 Summer hummer number. From the time the first broods of young hummingbirds leave the nest in late spring (as early as mid-May in southern locales) the hummer numbers at your feeder will begin to swell. Watch for a big increase in feeder activity in the dog days of late summer. This is also when single males set up their bully territories. To address this problem, put up multiple feeders in a cluster. The bully will tire out and let others feed eventually.

9 Spot the tots. Fledgling birds are out and about, having just left the friendly confines of the nest. Some, such as hungry young robins, can be noisy and easy to see. Others, such as young Wood Thrushes, are mostly silent and still. Listen for unfamiliar calls, whistles, and cheeping. These are the location and feeding calls of young birds, sounds that help busy parents relocate dispersed youngsters to feed them. If you find a nestling bird out of a nest, the best policy is to leave it alone. The young of many species are able to survive outside the nest at a surprisingly young (and young-looking) age.

8 Young bachelor males. Early summer is also when unmated first-year male birds are still lonely, singing, and looking for love in all the wrong places. These birds are too young and inexperienced, having hatched just last summer, to attract a prime female or to defend premier habitat. So it is their lot to wander around hoping to find someone and someplace to call their own. Listen and watch for these young guys—next year you won't recognize them!

7 Changing menu. I am always fascinated at how every summer is different from a backyard perspective. Some are hot and dry, some are wet and cool—all of which has an effect on the birds and what they are eating. Some years are good fruit years, so we get lots of robins and waxwings. Until late June, hummingbirds are scarce at our feeders. This is because the honeysuckle blossoms and other nectar-producing flowers are abundant, and the hummers are taking advantage of this natural nectar source. Watch what food source is abundant in your backyard, and then watch how the birds take advantage of it.

6 Who is eating what? One way to gain insight into your birds' diets is to check your fence posts and deck rails for clues as to what's being eaten. Many insect eaters, such as bluebirds, flycatchers, and even owls, will catch a flying insect and proceed to a handy perch to subdue and process the insect for consumption. This processing can involve smacking the insect on a hard surface, or it can be a simple tearing off of hard-to-digest parts such as wings, legs, antennae, and heads. Needless to say this activity leaves behind some pretty obvious clues. If you can tell what legs, wings, and so forth, belong to which insects, you'll know what is on the birds' menu. I might also mention what clues berry- and fruit-eaters leave behind. Check your freshly washed car or clean laundry on the clothesline for these clues!

A Song Sparrow rests at a shallow birdbath.

ALICE MIDDLETON/WBU

5 Water world. Summer is the best time of year to watch bathing behavior at your birdbath. All birds need water and most backyard species need it for both bathing and drinking. Late morning and late afternoon on sunny days are good times to watch for activity. If your bath is fitted with a dripper or mister, it will be even more attractive

4 Butterflies. If warblers are "the butterflies of the bird world," as Roger Tory Peterson once said, then butterflies must be the silent warblers of the insect world. Like birds, butterflies can be found everywhere, especially when the weather is hot and sunny. When the bird watching slows down in mid-afternoon, get out your butterfly field guide and switch your attention to these delicate beauties. You can attract butterflies with nectar feeders, flowers, wet muddy earth, and rotten fruit.

3 Evening song. Many bird species besides owls and goatsuckers will sing at night. Some famous nighttime singers include the Northern Mockingbird, American Woodcock, Wilson's Snipe, Common Loon, and herons, bitterns, and rails. In the backyard, in addition to mockers, you might hear sparrows, warblers, cardinals, and flycatchers tune up for a song. Is this territoriality by males, or is it just nighttime restlessness? Probably it's a combination of both factors. When out at night, keep your ears open to hear what birds might sing.

2 You with the stars in your eyes. Birding optics are great for looking at the nighttime sky. I find that our spotting scope works better than any astronomical telescope I've ever owned (perhaps because I only owned cheap astronomy scopes!). Binoculars, although only 7 to 10 power, can be surprisingly useful for getting a better look at the moon, stars, and planets. A good method for using binoculars for stargazing is to lie on your back on the ground. Once your eyes adjust to the night, you can focus your binocs and enjoy long periods of star watching without getting a sore neck and tired arms.

1 Early fall migrants. Early fall migration at our farm in southeastern Ohio begins in mid-July. Shorebirds, swallows, male hummingbirds, and some small songbirds begin the trek southward even as we're still planning summer vacations and flipping burgers on the hibachi. Watch for these early migrants dropping out of the sky in the early morning or as silhouettes passing over the face of the moon at night. But, bird watcher beware! Some male warblers won't look like they did when they passed through in spring. I suppose that's what keeps us anticipating and watching for the birds that pass through our yards—and through our lives—season after season.

Birds In Depth

Mourning Doves in the Morning

by JOHN SCHAUST

One of life's simple pleasures, often missed in today's world, is going to sleep with your windows open. To be gently awakened in the early morning by an enchanting cacophony of bird songs is an experience that was common to our ancestors, but one that has rapidly disappeared in modern society.

As an early riser, the Mourning Dove's plaintive cooing call is almost always a part of the dawn song heard just outside the window. While many of the other birds' songs are cheery and bright, the Mourning Dove's call sounds almost sad and lamenting.

The Mourning Dove really doesn't have much to be sad about. It has truly prospered from humankind's activities and is now one of the most abundant and widespread birds to be found in North America. It is estimated that 350 – 450 million of these doves inhabit the continent each autumn, making it one of the 10 most numerous and ubiquitous bird species in the United States.

Something else for them to be happy about is their potential lifespan. Although the average longevity for a typical adult is only about one year, the oldest known free-living Mourning Dove, as proven by bird banding research, was more than 31 years old! This is one of the longest lifespans ever recorded for any terrestrial bird found in North America.

This feat of longevity is even more amazing when you consider that the Mourning Dove is classified as a game bird in at least 38 states. Hunters harvest approximately 25 million of them every year. In perspective, this means that the annual Mourning Dove harvest exceeds the total harvest of all other migratory game species combined.

Death from non-hunting related causes (weather, predators, disease, etc.) is believed to claim four to five times the number of Mourning Doves taken in hunting. It is estimated that between 50 – 65 percent of all Mourning Doves die annually.

But with all of this annual mortality, just how does the Mourning Dove manage to maintain such a viable population under the weight of such losses?

Modestly stated, they are inexhaustible breeders.

Mourning Doves are monogamous and form strong pair bonds that persist during at least one nesting season. They may have up to six clutches per year—the largest number of nesting cycles of any North American bird—with a typical clutch size of two eggs. This prolific nesting helps the Mourning Dove to keep its large population stable from year to year.

So maybe the Mourning Dove isn't so sad after all!

And as for their plaintive call you hear outside your window every morning, it just may be their way of trying to wake you up early to fill the feeders.

Mourning Dove.

BRIAN HENRY

Mourning Dove Fun Facts

- Like all birds, Mourning Doves are unable to sweat. To stay cool during hot weather, they pant much like a dog. Panting requires the doves to drink a great deal of water due to the excessive loss of moisture to evaporation.
- Doves are one of the few species of birds that drink by sucking up their water instead of taking a bill full of water and letting it trickle down their throat. They can suck up their total daily requirement in less than 20 seconds.
- Both Mourning Dove parents feed their young on "crop milk," a yogurt-like secretion produced by the walls of their crop. It takes both parents to provide enough food for the growing nestlings.

Eastern and Spotted Towhees— *Continued from page 1*

have contributed to the evolution of the white spots on the backs of the Spotted Towhee. It makes for effective camouflage.

Diet

The most appropriate word to describe the towhee's diet is "omnivorous." Depending on what menu the season offers, both species will happily consume seeds, fruits, and all stages of invertebrates such as beetles, caterpillars, moths, grasshoppers crickets, and many other assorted creepy-crawlies.

Calls and Songs

Towhees have some interesting calls and songs. I will be honest—I was fooled by the meow-like call of a Spotted Towhee. The mew call of the Spotted Towhee is apparently analogous to the chewink call of the Eastern Towhee, and has been described by some as "whining or mewing, nasal, slurred, catlike."

Both towhee species are aggressively territorial, particularly at the edges or boundaries of given territories. Like most bird species that hold a territory, the dimension of its defended area depends on the population size and the resources available to it. In general, a towhee territory might range from two to five acres.

Nesting

As with many songbirds, it is the female towhee that makes the final selection on the nest site—either on the ground or slightly elevated from it, but with litter piled right up to the rim, and well-concealed in tangles or heavy thickets. The nest itself is generally composed of bark strips, dead leaves, grasses, twigs, and sometimes bits of cardboard or string. The eggs—ranging from whitish to white suffused with pink, green or gray and speckled with brown to purplish gray—are laid one a day to form a clutch of two to six, but usually three to five. If the clutch is lost, another is laid. Only the female incubates the eggs, which hatch in 12 or 13 days.

The nestlings are quite typical of songbird nestlings and leave the nest in 10 to 11 days. The parents feed their

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BirdWatcher's Digest

In every issue of *BirdTracks* we feature questions from you, our best customers. We welcome your suggestions, comments and questions. We also hope to share your tips and ideas for enhancing our enjoyment of backyard birds and wildlife with other *BirdTracks* readers all over North America.

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Eastern and Spotted Towhees—*Continued from page 5*

Eastern Towhee.

young for about four weeks after fledging. Occasionally in warmer climates, such as in California and Florida, towhees have been known to raise a second brood—and, rarely in the Spotted Towhee, a third—in a single season.

The population numbers of Eastern Towhees have shown a disturbing decline during the past two or three decades, while the Spotted Towhee has been a little more fortunate, with its population even increasing in the northwestern part of its range. Loss of habitat from urbanization, as well as changing forestry and agricultural practices, is largely to blame for the Eastern Towhee's decrease, although it is still relatively common and abundant in some habitats.

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