

Highlights of Notes & Anecdotes Fall 2003

Santa Does This for a Living?

(Most likely) a Common Merganser, discovered June 9 in the little village of Bath, Ontario, arrived suddenly inside the fireplace grate of surprised family. Very strong, very irritated and hissing loudly. Captured in a blanket and bundled into the car to be checked by me, but one of the sons couldn't resist a teeny peek as they were setting off and the prisoner charged out, rampaging around the inside of the car. Consternation—doors hurriedly hurled open—duck flew strongly away, probably swearing vigorously in duck-language.

This is a *big* fish-eater, weighing as much as a Great Horned Owl. Those folk need a chimney cap! (And some upholstery cleaner.)

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Common Mergansers usually nest in a hollow in a tree, bank, cliff, or even a rock pile. From above, a chimney is a rock pile with a hollow in it.



BLACK MERGANSER *sootius chimnius*

The Eaglet, the Auntie, and the Outcome

The story starts on July 8 1991 on a fish-rich and residence-free lake in Ontario, where an eaglet tumbled from his nest in a white pine tree. Though this one was not very high as Bald Eagle nests go, the youngster broke his wing and ripped his tail-stump, which soon became busily infested with blowfly maggots as he squatted on the shore squealing loudly to his parents. By the fish remains and white stripes radiating from him, we knew that he was being fed there. Some fishermen found him and helped get him to us.

Though we knew that his wing would probably have healed naturally if we had left him to the care of his parents, his tail-wound needed attention where the squirming larvae threatened the deep cup-like follicles holding his twelve newly sprouting tail-feathers—a damaged follicle can neither support nor nourish a feather, and an eagle needs his tail.

This was a big chick—2300 g, of which about 200 g was fish in his crop. An X-Ray revealed a closed

common or garden distal ulnar fracture; hundreds of these fractures have taught us this one was best left alone, which we did—no support, no bandages, no anything; after all it had a built-in splint already—the radial bone next to it.

We concentrated on cleaning up his stinking wound. At the sink we hosed the great jagged tear, watching with satisfaction as thousands of maggots poured down the drain. Then back to the treatment table for a close look, tweezering out all the larvae we could see before thoroughly powdering it all with diatomaceous earth. All soft parts of bug bodies when pricked by sharp diatom fragments dehydrate and die; simple, quick, and non-toxic. We use it for lice, mites, hippoboscid flies as well as blowfly maggots, but it is sold for gardening.

Throughout this damp procedure the eaglet made no demur. An odd-looking creature this, topped with shaggy brown plumage, brown eyes and beak, and bottomed with thick buttercup-yellow legs and feet. Released into an aviary, he enthusiastically gobbled chopped mice (for now, better nutrition than fish) and sprawled out comfortably, baby-raptor fashion, to relax after all that fuss.

The next most important step for the health of this eaglet was to acquire a foster-parent, an “auntie,” and being fresh out of them, we borrowed an unreleasable one from a distant wildlife centre. The adult soon adapted to the undisturbed aviary with its ferns and bushes in which the eaglet now rested in a nest I had improvised on a raised platform. To me this haphazard accumulation of sticks looked thoroughly uncomfortable, but he stayed there for several before deciding to adventure groundward.

Meantime, he ate mice or chopped fish from a dog-bowl passed through a small hatch at nest-level. From a one-way window we were pleased to see “Auntie” spend long periods beside the youngster, who squeaked softly to her. Her rôle was simply to keep him thinking “eagle.”

For a few weeks they both spent most of their time wandering around the aviary, wading into the pool to seize live fish, or just loafing; eagles are not energetic creatures. One day a fisherman brought a large pickerel. Auntie promptly dragged it off for a private feast, but just as she got started, the dozing eaglet woke up and began to squeal anxiously. *Hey, wait for me!* Scrambling to his feet, he ran at the big fierce-looking adult and her fish, squealing louder and louder. Unseen at the window, we held our breath. Naturally the needs of the young prevailed, and Auntie reluctantly retired, leaving the eaglet to eat his fill.

On the 19th day I banded one of his big yellow legs, and with some Ministry of Natural Resources conservation officers we accomplished the most imperative step of all: returning our prize to his parents. Breeding Bald Eagles are quite rare in S-E Ontario. Two days before, a sibling had also fallen, but was uninjured and just starting to fly with short practice bounds; probably he spread his wings on descent to soften the landing. Our younger eaglet would not be flying for at least another two weeks—his flight-feathers were still in blood (being nourished by their blood-supply) but we acted on the ad-



2300 g of eagle chick

vice of Peter Nye, well-known American naturalist who has studied and banded hundreds of eaglets. Peter said to take him back at once and risk the predators: the family bond was all-important for his health.

So we all jumped to it, and drove to the lake in question (because many eagles get shot, I have not identified it) boated a long way to the island where we delicately ushered the 4230 gram youngster out of the box within four metres of his sibling. We spent the rest of the day quietly listening and watching the area and the adults, who were seen several times and were in attendance. Luckily there seemed to be no raccoons on the island (we have seen large grounded eaglets eaten by them before) and curious boaters were diplomatically encouraged to keep moving.

A daily "eagle watch" rota was organized, some observers being Ministry, some being friends of ours. At their last report fifteen days later, the family remained intact, adults bringing fish to their audible but invisible young who were well concealed in cool heavy undergrowth. The future of these eaglets looked promising.

The eaglet's story ends **twelve years later, with his band recovery on April 15 2003**
Our eagle's body found in or near Duparquet,
Quebec. Sadly, dead.

RESPONSE NEEDED PLEASE!

This Bald Eagle Band Recovery reported to the Bird Banding office by:
Joycelyn Grenier, Agent de la Faune,
622 2ième Rue Est,
La Sarre, Quebec, J9Z 2S5.

The reason I am including the finder's name and address is because I want to ask her about the circumstances, but I can't find her. I'd love to learn the details of this great raptor, whether he/she was a known breeder and how the death came about. Where are you, Joycelyn?

Another Band Recovery report I received was that of an adult Red-tailed Hawk with closed head injury after a vehicle collision. Cared for at ACRF for 29 days then released at site. **BAND REPORT** (received by me July 2003— US banding office can be slow!) Found on September 4, 2002, in
Cape Croker Indian Park,
RR 5, Warton Ontario,
NOH 2T0.

Report summary, which is sent to banders in brief codes, read, "caught due to injury" and "released alive." Distance: from us 900 km NW as the crow flies. I wrote twice, sent the complete case history, but have had no answer. Please, Cape Croker Park, respond: what happened to the hawk? Was my band taken off and a new one put on? It is an important part of my trauma study.

Rare Albino Raven

Fully albino Common Raven, Port Clemens, B.C., August 1997. Photograph included in a letter from a supporter. This large city bird was probably well-known, and in the photograph it is just landing on a car roof carrying something in its big pink beak. Unfortunately this rare bird was later electrocuted when it flew between high voltage overhead wires and bridged two lines with its wings. Ravens are reported to have a wingspan of 142 cm (56 inches) which is a rather general measurement because of the elasticity that results in pulling out two wings. This is equal to that of a Red-tailed or Rough-legged

Hawk. But the span is what matters in this sort of electrocution.

Albinism is caused by the genetic change that inhibits the production of the enzyme tyrosinase that is responsible for the production of the dark pigment melanin. There are several categories of albinism: total, incomplete, partial. Total is the rarest. The eyes are pink because there is no melanin in the irises so that the blood in the retina can be seen. Often albino or partly albino birds have weak eyesight and brittle feathering. I have seen the brittle, thin primaries and tail feathers in House Sparrows and chickadees. We also had an immature osprey with imperfect albinism—a fascinating shade of cafe-au-lait. She came from the Peterborough area and it was reported that her family were very pale also.



Rare pure form of albinism is seen in this raven just landing on a car roof in Port Clemens, B.C.

Her Choice

A family called us when they decided to enjoy the June sunshine on their 4th floor balcony on the Kingston waterfront, and discovered to their dismay it was already occupied by a female Mallard duck with new hatchlings. Somehow, the long-incubating duck was not noticed behind a small tree until her eggs hatched. Of course the mum would not leave them and they were rather high up for a jump, though that is normal procedure for many ducks such as Wood Ducks and occasional mallards who nest in trees in the wild. The little fluffies launch in the air and bounce like corks unharmed on the earth or water. But in this case the duck hadn't taken the asphalt pavement into account.

We suggested that the family capture the ducklings and pop them in a box to take them down to the shore; we thought the duck would fly down to join them, but she steadfastly refused to leave without her brood, and simply allowed them to pick her up as well. So there was a very happy ending with the whole family in the water (the ducks, not the people) and a lot of photographs which they kindly sent me.



Mallards incubate their dozen or so eggs 26-29 days beginning with completion of clutch. Building the nest and then laying one egg a day must have occupied over two weeks before that, all accomplished unnoticed behind a small evergreen tree in a pot!

PS. They enjoyed it all so much (the people, not the ducks) that they plan to leave their little tree in the same place in case that duck decides to repeat her performance next spring. I'll tell you if she does.

The Feathered Cannonball

Crash! You rush to see what hit your window and find the offender either a) lying peacefully in your flower-border, usually dead, often decorated with a few hundred sparkling pieces of glass, or b) inside the room, very much alive and ready to do it again. A fair number of us country-dwellers become acquainted with the Ruffed Grouse this way. The other way is when they smash on your windshield—35% of our admissions did that.

Of our 81 admissions, 28% had hit windows. Of those, 61% banged the panes in the fall. Of all window collisions, only 9% were released.

We have often noticed that grouse-finders misidentify them as hawks. Some people find them hard to describe: “Different shades of brown, a black band on the tail, a hooked beak,” if what we often hear on the telephone.

The mis-clue that causes confusion is usually the beak. Like chickens, ptarmigan, quail, peafowl,

pheasants, partridge and turkeys, they belong to the *galliformes* order; they are all ground-living, with short, round wings with stiffly bowed primaries capable of swift though short flights; and they all have a strong, downcurved beak made for tugging buds, rootlets, nuts, seeds, and berries. It is not hooked like a hawk’s beak, but many people have never seen a hawk close up and so can not make a good comparison.

Rather than struggling with adjectives over the beak, we ask about another part of their anatomy that differentiates them more surely— the foot. Here is the unmistakable difference between a grouse and any hawk that is likely to be hitting your window (chasing a bird, often a grouse). In winter, grouse grow little flanges along the sides of their toes to act like snowshoes on soft snow.



Feet of Ruffed Grouse



Feet of Cooper's Hawk. Note long halluxes (hind toes)

I'm a naturalist, as you know, and so I was excited when a local family brought me an insect I had never seen before. They wouldn't let me take the jar until they were sure I wasn't going to kill it! Me, who takes ants, earwigs and Deer Mice outside, and who tried to recusitate a wasp that I nearly swallowed because it had been on the other side of my sandwich! I never kill anything unless it is suffering. I cooled the wasp in the freezer for a few minutes and then took some photographs outside before it got active again. An entomologist at the Royal Ontario Museum identified it as *vespa crabro*, North America's largest wasp, a beautiful creature. Like all wasps and bees, they only sting if someone bothers them.



Vespa Crabro, largest wasp in North America



Find me! Least Bittern in a jar of grasses

Least Bittern

Kingston, July 22 2003. An adult Least Bittern flying low across a road was bounced off the pavement by a car, temporarily winded with some roadburn on its tarsi. Very healthy. What a lovely treat to see! They are quite rare. I banded and released it immediately back in its original marsh. This is the second one we have had in the same condition—with some roadburn— and Mike Cadman of Bird Studies Canada told me about yet another.

This is such a tiny heron that he can be easily enclosed in one hand. Once years ago when I was holding him close to my chest looking down at him admiringly, he suddenly shot his long sharp beak straight up my nose!

This is the smallest heron anywhere, weighing only from 70 g to 90 g, same weight as a healthy robin. Very shy, with a preference for running and climbing through the thick cattail marshes or making short, low fluttering flights when they have to. We have had eleven, with six of them being banded and released.



My best photo of the summer. Yellow-billed Cuckoo that struck a window and recovered here in a week. This was at release