

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

We Created a Monster

This Backyard Birder has moved to Asheville, N.C., back to the hometown our family left more than 20 years ago. Husband Carl and I have been so busy getting settled and re-acquainted with old friends and places that there has been precious little time for birding. It is early January as I write this, and we have just gotten some feeders up. We have to heed the advice often given to others putting up feeders for the first time—be patient! It may be February before the first chickadee finds the seeds and leads others to them. We have seen, in our brief forays outside, that there are plenty of the winter flocks consisting of chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and woodpeckers around. Have also noted a small flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers and some House Finches. We were aware that the finches had been seen in the mountain area, but did not know the extent of their movements. The big surprise, and a delightful one so far, has been seeing a couple of tiny Brown-headed Nuthatches occasionally. We feared we had left them behind in Raleigh. We had read in *Chat* last year that some had been sighted on the campus of UNC-A, which is not too far distant.

From time to time, I have made reference in this department to the extensive feeding program carried on in our Raleigh backyard. Perhaps now is the time to elaborate on this program—how it came about and the advantages and disadvantages.

Back in the late sixties, we began a feeding program that grew and grew until it became a time-consuming, expensive, and burdensome “monster.” We were really shocked a few years back, when answering a questionnaire, to discover that over a year we were feeding several hundred individual birds. The cost of this for seeds, peanut butter, cornmeal, and peanuts was astounding.

It all began innocently enough. In addition to the regular hanging seed feeders and a chunk of suet or two, we enticed a pair of Rufous-sided Towhees to come close for handouts; bread crumbs and sunflower seeds. It was summer, during the nesting season. The male towhee was most eager to find food for his young and became quite bold and fearless, hopping within a few feet to pick up the offerings. A nesting Brown Thrasher, foraging along the same hedgerows, caught on to what was happening. He, and later, his mate, began to slip out and grab a bit of extra food, too. A pair of Gray Catbirds joined the small group by late summer. The following spring, these same birds returned for help in feeding their nestlings. The young, when on their own, saw where the parent birds were getting extra goodies. Before long they, too, were coming for handouts. Somewhere

along the line, we began mixing cornmeal and peanut butter, oftentimes adding bacon drippings or melted suet and expanding and softening the whole by addition of boiling water. We made this mixture into cakes and from these cakes, pinched off bite-sized bits to toss on the ground. This food the birds liked so well, that they no longer would take bread. As time went by, the birds accepted me along with the food, permitting me to come quite close. Every time I went outside, I would hear one or another calling to me, begging, nay, even *demanding* food! I recall one hot summer when the pair of towhees would hop up onto the back porch and call "joreet" loudly until I came with the food.

The real growth of our monster began in the summer of 1972. It was in early August of that year that we found and raised a baby American Robin. When he was being fed strained baby meat, with a medicine dropper, the other birds gathered around and watched. Somehow, the total fearlessness of the baby bird reassured them that we were harmless. Many of the adults were feeding young; so whenever we went out to feed the robin, here came a towhee hopping towards us. Or a thrasher would run out from under a hedge. It did not take long after that for those bright-eyed seers of everything that goes on, the Blue Jays, to take advantage of the "freebies." We found that the young birds were less fearful and more willing to try something new. Soon, even Northern Cardinals joined the society of free-loaders. By fall, the robin departed (to return the following spring). We began making up more food at a time and began feeding these "tame" birds on a year-round basis. To our surprise, we began to find White-throated Sparrows and a Northern Mockingbird joining the throng. By the following winter, Dark-eyed Juncos came into the fold. And from then on the monster really began to grow. Here came grackles, starlings and House Sparrows. It became impossible to shoo away the unwanted birds, and we just had to accept them along with the rest.

When our "baby" robin returned in the spring, he somehow communicated to his mate that our food was good for feeding nestlings. We had robins from then on, long after the original one was gone. There was a period of 3 years when we had a male Wood Thrush come for the mixture during the time he was feeding young. Also, we had a male Summer Tanager for several summers. When he found it difficult to compete with birds on the ground, I would toss a piece of food up in the air so he could catch it on the wing. When the towhees would come for help in feeding their cowbird young, they would bring the fledglings. The latter quickly discovered the food and were the tamest of all. There were winters when we had a lovely male Pine Warbler joining the group, and occasionally a chickadee or Carolina Wren. I began putting some of the food on tree trunks for woodpeckers. Soon a gorgeous male Red-bellied Woodpecker began partaking. He would call to me for food from a perch. As soon as I put his food in the side of the tree, he would fly to the tree and back down to the food. He would eat it there, or take a beakful back to the nest. When his young were fledged, he brought them to the tree. Thus began a succession of woodpeckers expecting to be fed. Of course, other birds found this food on tree trunks, too—warblers, kinglets, creepers, and nuthatches.

As the monster continued to grow, it occurred to me that our feeding program was causing an unnatural situation. Birds that normally had their own feeding niches to fill began to be in competition with other species. Individuals within a species became highly competitive and aggressive. Territorial disputes became exaggerated, considerably. We see this at feeders in winter, but here we had nesting birds coming from all directions wanting our food. Woe unto the bird caught crossing into another's territory. We found

ourselves putting out food in every corner of the yard, front and back, and even across the street in the woods in order to cut down on the hassles. We almost dreaded the first trip out in the morning when the throng descended on us en masse. It was better on days when we were working outside. We would carry some food in a pocket and feed whatever bird managed to get our attention without drawing a crowd. Some of these birds were always willing to take the earthworms, grubs, and cutworms we might dig up. Others would take only the special food. We were never able to entice the Purple or House Finches, or Evening Grosbeaks to try this food. They were content to gobble up the sunflower seeds.

In addition to feeding the birds our special food, we always scattered mixed grains in the front driveway and a couple of bare spots in the backyard. This attracted doves as well as the many white-throats and juncos. We had a time pattern, which the birds knew. At first light in the morning came the eaters of scattered seed. In winter, especially when weather was bad, we placed extra rations out in early afternoon. Looking out a window, it was interesting to note that the birds began to gather in trees and shrubbery in anticipation of the feeding time. The first flake of snow, or just before the leading edge of a cold front, brought a rush of birds expecting to find food.

We did enjoy having wild birds approach us whenever we went out of doors. It gave us an opportunity to keep up with migration patterns of various species arriving and leaving as the seasons changed. Because the birds were unafraid, we were able to watch them close at hand and study their behavior. We had opportunities to observe the many stages of growth and development from fledgling to adult. We came to know individuals by their markings and personality traits. In fact, we made our backyard a kind of laboratory. Many of the observations we have reported from time to time would not have been possible had we not established this monster feeding program. In spring, we would know when various broods had hatched by noting that the parent birds began taking food away rather than eating it on the spot. We had, over the years, first-hand looks at sick or injured birds. They tended to become less fearful and would come quite close in order to get something to eat, not having to hassle the other birds.

But, every spring, after the monster became so large, I vowed to cease this feeding program. It was taking up far too much of my time, and there was little pleasure in going out in the worst winter weather to toss out bits and pieces. But always there was one special bird I couldn't resist, and so we kept it up, year after year. We did slack off during the summer and early fall months, but come winter, there we were, back at it again.

When we decided to move to Asheville this past fall, I knew I had to stop feeding these birds. Fortunately, with all the packing that had to be done, I was not outside much, and could ignore the birds. It was not easy, mind you, but necessary. There are many feeders in the neighborhood, and perhaps this winter the folks are doing a land-office business. Some used to complain that we always got "all the good birds." We could not help wondering if the Fox Sparrow came back this winter, and finding no food, went on to a more suitable habitat.

Of course, getting out from under the burden of the feeding program was not the reason for our move. However, it has been good to have a breather and to devote more time to other duties. We have vowed never again to get into such a feeding program. We

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I wish to stress two points. First, none of the singing males were relocated after the last (or only) date recorded above at each site nor were females seen. Thus, the evidence suggests all these males were unmated despite their occurrence during the breeding season in apparently favorable habitat. Second, only the last two records were from elevations of 427 m (1400 feet), or higher, where Blue-winged Warblers are known to breed at the nearest localities in Georgia and North Carolina (Hamel et al. 1982). The only published May or June records of the species in the last 11 years suggest that in South Carolina the Blue-winged Warbler is outside its breeding range. No known or presumed breeding record exists for South Carolina, but only evidence for possible breeding.

Field Notes in Briefs for the Files of *Chat* cited above are not referenced below.

LITERATURE CITED

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will only feed birds in conventional feeders. But it does seem strange to go outside and have no birds coming to greet me. They act like normal wild birds here; they either ignore me, or fly away!

Life is constantly changing, bringing with it new challenges and opportunities. We look forward to new things in our new setting. But, once a birder, always a birder. We are content to look back on our years of the monster, recalling the pleasures and lessons learned. During those years, we sharpened our skills in identifying the many species we encountered—seeing them, learning their songs and calls from tiny fledgling to mature breeding adult. We made volumes of notes on behavior, some of which we have already shared with others. And, speaking of other birders, we made so many friends in Raleigh and Wake County and hope to keep up our contacts. We are looking forward to getting to know the birders here in Asheville and Buncombe County, too.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 52 Lakeshore Drive, Asheville, N.C. 28804.