

The Hungry Bird: A Review

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*Time flies when
you're having fun*



Loggerhead Shrike. Boulder. 14 July 2019. Photo by Peter Burke.

We are all constantly reminded every day of the phrase, “Time flies when you’re having fun.” It seems even more appropriate for us birders, who spend a lot of that flying time observing things with feathered wings. When the gentle reminder from Editor Christy Payne flew into my email in-box, however it happens, that another “Colorado Birds” deadline was approaching, it hit me. How can it have been a quarter of a year since the last deadline!? Considering the time span of this column as a whole, it, too, has been like a peregrine at max stoop speed. The subjects one could still write about are endless in one sense, but starting to feel like a Chinese finger trap in another. Most of the obvious, big-ticket items that feed our birds have been covered. A few formidable, important topics remain, like grasshoppers, aphids, carrion, spiders, birds eaten by other birds, and..... I better quit before I psyche myself out.

It occurred to me, also, maybe a very brief review is in order. That first column came out in the April 2010 issue (44(2)), nine years ago! How can it be? I probably had hair, that wasn’t gray, that wasn’t arranged in such a way it needed covering up by an “old man’s wig” (aka ball hat). So, here goes.

INSECTS

MILLER MOTHS, Issue 44(2), April 2010. Eaten by birds in both their caterpillar (cutworm) stage and as moths. Primary species is the Army Cutworm (*Euxoa auxiliaris*). Cutworms grubbed out of winter wheat and a broad range of “weedy” vegetation in autumn, winter and spring, mostly spring. As the adult moths move to higher elevation, they are eaten by low-elevation migrants in late spring and breeding species in the mountains in summer. As the adult moths reverse migrate to the lowlands in autumn, they are not much of a food factor, mostly because their return is spread over 3+ months and because so many other foods are also available to north-to-south or altitudinal migrant birds.

CATERPILLARS, Issues 47(4), October 2013, and 48(1), January 2014. Caterpillars are super important to birds, particularly as nutrition for nestlings. This topic, particularly as it pertains to native woody plants, has been championed by Dr. Doug Tallamy and his students at the University of Delaware. While the availability and value of caterpillars to birds is perhaps greater to birds in the eastern deciduous forests than here in the Rocky Mountain West, they are, nonetheless, critical. These two columns review the various “tricks” caterpillars have evolved to avoid/minimize predation by birds.

MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE, Issue 46(1), January 2012. This bark beetle which dominates, along with fire, the natural ecology of both ponderosa and lodgepole pine, is an important food of woodpeckers and, opportunistically, many other birds. Woodpeckers are able to utilize this insect in all stages because of their ability to reach the phloem layer just under the bark where the insect develops and dwells for the majority of the year. Other birds only have access to flying adults during the rather brief summer dispersal/flight period. The main benefactor of these conspicuous bark beetle cycles is Hairy Woodpecker, both in terms of food and dead trees for cavity-nesting.

EARWIGS, Issue 52(3), July 2018. Mostly detested by us, loved by birds, particularly wrens, robins, and many other of our summering, urban birds.

ROUGH STINK BUGS, Issue 48(3), July 2014. Members of the stink bug genus *Brochymena* are cryptic inhabitants of tree branches. They can be both predaceous on other insects and sap feeders. Vireos, particularly those in the “solitary” group, love them.

HACKBERRY GALL-MAKING PSYLLIDS, Issue 44(3), July 2010. Tiny insects of at least 4 species in the genus *Pachypsylla*, that form galls on the leaves, petioles and tiny twigs of hackberry trees in the genus *Celtis* (of which CO has two: one native (Netleaf), one a widely planted ornamental (Northern)). Most prominent is the Hackberry Nipplegall Psyllid. Adult gall-making psyllids overwintering in bark are utilized by creepers, nuthatches, chickadees, and other gleaners. Adults en route in spring and autumn from bark to other plant parts, especially leaves, are consumed in huge numbers by neotropical migrants and others (mostly April and September/October). Late-instar nymphs, extracted from galls by finches, chickadees (and fox squirrels) in late summer.

MIDGES, Issue 52(1), combined October 2018/January 2019. Non-biting, mosquito-like flies in the family Chironomidae. They are present at all times of the year where there is open water. Very valuable to insectivorous birds, particularly at times when other insects are tough to come by. Eaten by grebes, small gulls, shorebirds, certain ducks, most all types of passerine birds, especially swallows.



White-lined Sphinx Moth larva. 23 June 2014. Photo by Dave Leatherman.

WHITE-LINED SPHINX MOTH, Issue 48(4), October 2014. The highly variable and large caterpillars, which are “hornworms,” can be abundant at times on primrose and a wide variety of low-growing plants, particularly along roadways. At such times they are taken by many birds including such disparate species as Swainson’s Hawk, American Robin, McCown’s Longspur, and House Sparrow. The adults, which hover ghostlike over garden flowers like petunias, are taken by many birds (kestrels, flycatchers, warblers, etc.).

HONEYLOCUST SEED BEETLE, Issue 50(1), January 2016. This pea weevil in the family Bruchidae, is commonly extracted from the pods of honeylocust in late fall by Downy Woodpeckers, probably other low-elevation woodpeckers (and fox squirrels).

COTTONWOOD CATKIN WEEVILS, Issue 45(2), April 2011. We have 10 or so species in the genus *Dorytomus*. The ones in the male, pollen-producing catkins of the cottonwood are quite important to neotropical migrants. The non-descript white larvae are extracted from the red, dangly flowers in April and early May. Warblers, vireos, and orioles are among their biggest fans. Birds like sparrows, finches, and blackbirds also feed on the flower parts. Weevil feeders are “picky” and selective, while flower feeders are fast and general (think kids at a pizza party).

DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES, Issue 45(3), July 2011. Produced in water areas but often found far from it, this group of rather large insects in the order Odonata is a prominent diet item of a broad spectrum of bird species. Certainly, “waterbirds” consume them most often but groups we think of as mostly terrestrial like hawks, falcons, flycatchers, and even warblers won’t pass them up when detected.

EUROPEAN ELM FLEA WEEVIL, Issue 46(3), July 2012. This European, elm leafmining insect was first detected in Colorado in 2006. Almost nothing is known previously about its being fed upon by birds. This article details what I have observed in the six years between its being noticed and spring 2011. A second article, Breakfast At Jane’s (Issue 50(3), July 2016) adds more information obtained during the next five years and features use in spring 2016 by a Golden-winged Warbler in the yard of John and Jane Stulp in their farmyard south of Lamar.

FISH

GIZZARD SHAD, Issue 44(4), October 2010. Schools of this small to medium-sized, rather non-descript, white fish are the primary cause of large concentrations of diving waterfowl like mergansers and Western Grebes, and flocks of attendant gulls on our larger bodies of water, particularly in late autumn/early winter. Notable bird rarities have been found amid the feeding frenzies of these more common species. Shad often die under ice in winter and constitute a major component of available “fishkill” for scavengers like gulls, eagles, and corvids when ice goes off in late winter/early spring.

OTHER ANIMALS



Crayfish (Orconectes sp.). Larimer.
Photo by Dave Leatherman.

TICKS, Issue 49(3), July 2015. Certain birds, particularly corvids, glean ectoparasitic ticks from their mammalian hosts. This benefits both birds and tick victims. In Colorado Black-billed Magpies are the primary participants in this example of mutualism.

CRAYFISH, Issue 48(2), April 2014. A long roster of birds feed on crayfish, from loons and grebes to diving ducks to waders. Even screech-owls and blackbirds take them in large quantities. The species of crayfish thought to be present in Colorado and their published distributions are reviewed.

EARTHWORMS, Issue 46(2), April 2012. Most of our earthworms are introduced, which is a surprise to most people. A robin eating a worm is a borderline cliché. Yet, before 1900 the versatile robin relied on other things, as it does now in wild, uncultivated habitats. Most birds will eat worms when they see one. However, the subterranean habits of most worms preclude their availability unless a bird utilizes special anatomical features or the soil is saturated to the point probing is easy or the worms are forced to surface.

SCUTIGERA, Issue 46(4), October 2012. This exotic, tropical centipede is the ultimate “creepy crawlly.” Prior to discovery of its use as nestling food for Canyon Wrens near Fort Collins, this creature’s existence in Colorado was thought to be almost entirely inside human structures.

SOLIFUGES, Issue 50(4), October 2016. Known by various names including sun scorpions and camel spiders, these harmless arachnids are not well known. After seeing one in the beak of a Western Meadowlark parent making food runs to a Larimer County nest, I decided to summarize what little is known about these creatures as bird food.

VOLES/DEER MICE, Issue 51(2), April 2017. This column summarizes the importance of small rodents to predaceous birds (eagles, hawks, owls, falcons, and shrikes).

SNAKES, Issue 49(1), January 2015. Red-tailed Hawks consume them frequently, so do other summer buteos, waders, roadrunners, and even Common Grackles. Loggerhead Shrikes impale them, even behead them.

MANY-LINED SKINK, Issue 51(4), October 2017. My grandson Trey found my first one under a dry cowpie. Since then, Loggerhead Shrikes have shown me many dozens more impaled on barbed wire fences in Weld County. How do they find them?

PLANTS



Male Lesser Goldfinch getting seed from sunflower head at Pena Blanca Lake, Santa Cruz County, Arizona. 22 July 2006. Photo by Dave Leatherman.

PONDWEED, Issue 47(2), April 2013. Several species of the underwater plant genus *Potamogeton* are staples of certain diving ducks, swans, coots, and shorebirds. Most of these eat the leafy portions but their starchy tubers are delicacies in some cases.

RUSSIAN-OLIVE, Issue 45(1), January 2011. By no means the entirely “evil” tree it is made out to be in many natural resource agency circles, Russian-olive deserves measured respect. It harbors few insects, but the aphids and wood borers it supports are sought by warblers, woodpeckers, and others. The sweet pulp of its fruit fortifies Yellow-rumped Warblers, Northern Flickers, sapsuckers, flycatchers during migration, many gallinaceous birds, starlings, mimic thrushes, sparrows, waxwings, and many more.

FLASH FRUITS, Issue 45(4), October 2011. This column is devoted to an artificial category of sugary, watery fruits that are usually rapidly consumed after their appearance. As such, flash fruits are considered separate from those drier, more persistent fruits that last long past summer through the autumn, winter and into spring. “Wildlife gardening” often includes a component of these for easy attraction of birds like orioles, tanagers, waxwings, thrushes, and woodpeckers.

GREEN ASH SEEDS, Issue 51(1), January 2017. Samaras of this common, arguably overplanted, tree can be a treasured resource for seed-eating passerines like sparrows and finches. Also discussed is the impending threat to all *Fraxinus* species, the emerald ash borer.

COMMON BUCKTHORN, Issue 53(1), April 2019. An invasive by any definition, but not the sickening, empty nutrition its scientific name *Rhamnus cathartica* implies. Rather, it is highly useful to certain birds trying to cope with the requirements of migration and winter.

COMMON SUNFLOWER, Issue 47(1), January 2013. We all know black oil sunflower to be the “best” general food for backyard feeders. Wild sunflower seeds are almost as good and certainly more widespread. Not only do they provide seed for finches and sparrows but attract many insects, particularly aphids and flower visitors that lure insectivores like flycatchers and warblers.

NON-SAPSUCKER WOODPECKERS, Issue 51(3), July 2017. Woodpeckers other than sapsuckers peck holes in live tree bark and drink the sap which flows from them. Also discussed are woodpecker species other than sapsuckers that poach from sapsucker sap wells.

DIET OF SPECIAL BIRDS, KNOWN OR SPECULATED

WOODCOCK, Issue 49(2), April 2015. After a wintering woodcock departed Buffam Creek southwest of Fort Collins, an exploratory sampling of the muck it probed yielded many potential food items. I speculate about which ones the woodcock might favor and which might be enough to attract it and a few cohorts to this same area in subsequent winters.

GOLDEN-CROWNED WARBLER, Issue 52(2), April 2018. Arguably the rarest bird ever detected in CO, this Mexican wanderer spent the majority of its known stay in an eastern plains windbreak catching flies attracted to blooming chokecherries. I sampled the flies, described them, and speculate about which ones would have been the best food for this amazing little gem of a bird.

TROPICAL KINGBIRD, Issue 52(4), October 2018. Featuring yet another southern bird that appeared in south Denver, this article details items observed/photographed as being food of the kingbird. It also includes additional speculation about other foods occurring in the area which it probably ate. Its known diet included various tree fruits, moths, grasshoppers, and dragonflies.

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE LARDER, Issue 49(4), October 2015. Loggerhead Shrikes impale prey to hold/cache it, and to impress prospective mates. Are there other reasons? The array of items found impaled in eastern CO includes grasshoppers, crickets including robust camels and sandtreaders, beetles (particularly those associated with cow dung), bees, moths, dragonflies, lizards, snakes, spiders, small mammals, and both adult and nestling birds.

MISCELLANEOUS

DEFECT, Issue 50(2), April 2016. The notion that birds key in on damage caused to plants by phytophagous insects as a means of finding the makers of said damage is discussed.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HURRICANE BIRDING, Issue 47(3), July 2013. In the aftermath of hurricanes, birders in coastal areas have long known amazing birds and amazing bird behaviors often follow. We Rocky Mountain birders have the similar opportunities following late spring snow storms.

These articles are archived on the Colorado Field Ornithologists website.

I welcome suggestions from birders on future topics, photos of birds in the act of eating (if used in this column, you will, of course, be credited) and any other feedback. I continue to believe we should know more than we do about the lives of the birds we love. If hell froze over and agency managers of wildlife and land came to us and asked what they could do to promote this non-game bird or that, what would we tell them? We could tell them how to identify it and precisely where to find it within the next hour. What else could we offer? We have vast field experience, vehicles that can go anywhere, powerful optics, cameras that would make Ansel Adams drool, field guides with detail Audubon couldn't have discerned holding birds in his hands. We have the capability of expanding our knowledge of Colorado birds far beyond impressive lists. I wish there was a new iteration of the Breeding Bird Atlas every 5 years, as such endeavors force us to divert from checklists to the arena of behavior. I notice more mention of behavior in our posts than could be said 20 years ago. That's progress. I am heartened. There is much more we can add to the stories of the birds we find. We have over 500 options for embellishment in our wonderful, geographically-blessed state. As one of those box stores says in their ads, "Let's do this."

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