

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



JUNE TALES – Part 3

‘If those who are the enemies of innocent amusements had the direction of the world, they would take away the spring, and youth, the former from the year, the latter from human life.’ Honoré de Balzac

At times I have described in my journal that the singing of the birds is like a wall of song and with reference to the variety (and my lack of recognition skills), “The bird song is akin to walking through a foreign airport crowded with travelers and being able to recognize only a few of the languages.” On a walk down a bush road, I came across two robins, one on each side of the road, having a singing match. The west-side bird was matching note for note, the singing of the east-side bird. As June wears on, it is with sadness that we notice the morning choir is becoming quieter by the day. Fortunately there are a number of birds that will continue their songs despite the fact that chick-raising responsibilities are in full swing.

Our son called to say that he found a warbler nest with three smaller eggs and one larger olive-coloured egg. Sure enough, Doug had discovered a nest with the egg of a parasitic cowbird. Undoubtedly the

female cowbird had lain in wait until momma warbler was off the nest for a few seconds then popped in to lay her own egg. In some instances the cowbird will toss out an egg. Some victims of this bird will themselves toss out the strange egg, or rebuild another nest on top of the offending egg. Most of the time the unsuspecting parents will raise the little cowbird as their own but they pay a great price. The cowbird chick is usually larger and more aggressive than the host chicks and will often 'elbow' some of the competition out of the nest. The result is a healthy cowbird chick, exhausted parents and possibly underfed step-siblings. When fledging time comes, the cowbird chick bids farewell to its step-parents and rejoins the cowbird flock. The cowbird evolved to live with herds of bison, following the great beasts and gobbling the insects they drove from the grass. It is hard to maintain a nest and accompany bison herds so the birds evolved the parasitic laying behaviour.



photo Phil Burke

The middle of June last year was when I first saw the little pileated woodpeckers that had been hatched in a cavity their parents carved into a treated utility pole in early April. I watched the adults excavate the

cavity and begin incubating and now I saw the little redheaded youngsters. The last I saw of the two chicks was on June 24.

Last year we had a crow frequent our back yard. We named this bird 'Feather' because of the strange configuration of feathers sticking up on his back looking something like a wind-up key one would see on a child's toy. In late June Feather and his mate showed up together with two children, each with the same strange feather configuration as their dad.



Photo Wm Burke

My wife's all-time-favourite bird is the American goldfinch. This brilliant little yellow and black bird travels in small flocks and arrives at the feeders even before the males have completely lost their drab olive-green winter plumage. However, they soon take on the colour of the sun and although their call isn't very pretty it is nice and gentle nonetheless. The goldfinch won't be nesting anytime soon; the story goes that they wait until the thistles go to seed and then collect thistle down to use in their nests. That means they won't nest until late July or early August. My favourite perching (song) bird is the red-breasted nuthatch. Its song is

anything but pretty but the little bird is faithful, dedicated and a very hard worker. (How's that for anthropomorphizing?)