



Protecting eight pear trees and a dozen hollies is a fulltime job for this Northern Mockingbird and its mate



This female sapsucker is differentiated by her white throat. Males have a red throat. Note the fresh sap wells in the upper left corner.

Brunswick Wildlife Dang Mockingbird!!!

In late December, I birded Brunswick Community College's main campus. One stop was the Odell Williamson Auditorium area and the circular drive which is lined with eight Bradford pear trees.

While parking on the circle, I noticed a Yellow-rumped Warbler "creeping" around the trunk of a pear tree at the junction where the tree's limbs come together. The warbler's behavior seemed strange. Something was up.

I saw a woodpecker fly away from the pear tree. It was a female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. You may recall from a recent article that sapsuckers are the culprits responsible for chiseling circles of holes (called sap wells) around tree trunks. Sapsuckers feed on the sap as it flows from the wells and on the insects drawn to it.

In that article, I also whined about needing better sapsucker images, especially a female since I did not have one. So I waited patiently for a photo op when the sapsucker returned to "its" tree.

I was well positioned using my SUV for a blind. Time and again the sapsucker returned and was chased from the tree by a mockingbird. The sapsucker and I were both denied our treats.

I approached the mockingbird, getting close, shouting, and clapping my hands. Nothing flushed that bird. I told it I was going to find a rock, turned around, and walked away. A minute later I returned (just kidding about the rock) and found the mockingbird AND its mate both glaring at me.

That tree had something for everyone. The warbler was stealing insects and sap from the sap wells. The mockingbird was protecting its pear supply. The sapsucker also claimed the tree, evidenced by the many rows of sap wells. Apparently all were getting enough to eat.

The drama played out with the mockingbirds moving to protect another tree which let the sapsucker return and forage and I got my photos. It held my attention as I considered the importance a single tree might have in the winter survival for multiple species, especially given the raw cold we recently experienced.

How cold was it? Coming into Southport on Howe Street during the cold spell, I noticed a sign offering remote starter installation for \$169. Demand for remote starters in Southport? I've only heard of remoter starters used in the north by folks who do not have a garage and by gentlemen who have ratted out their "business associates".

Seriously, according to the National Weather Service the duration and intensity of the cold event during the last part of December and first two weeks of January made it a very unusual occurrence. Many days the cold was accompanied by gusty northwest winds, yielding single-digit chill factors.

Over the years we've experienced colder temperatures; however, our extreme cold spells usually last a day or two. This spell was periodically reinforced by a series of very strong arctic highs. The most recent comparable cold spell occurred during the last two weeks of January 1977.

Birds have to eat more in cold to maintain their body temperature. Obviously the sapsucker and other overwintering migrants appreciate the plentiful supply of fruit available in our area!

Like many of you, I have had mockingbird problems in my yard with them driving off other species I wanted at my feeders. This winter I briefly enjoyed the first visit to my suet feeder by a Baltimore Oriole. Harassed by a mocker, it only stayed a few days. Dang mockingbird!

Northern Mockingbirds are year-round residents over most of their range. Many of us have observed their fierce defense of territory. They are generally monogamous and many pairs spend the entire year occupying and defending a single territory. Others, however, maintain and defend distinct breeding and winter territories.

Some mockers in the northernmost part of their breeding range are partial migrants; however, others stay to the northern limits of their range throughout the winter. Of course, regional or local movements are required if breeding and wintering territories are different.

I returned several other days and learned how tough mockingbirds have it. On each visit I was able to locate the cast of characters at the auditorium. The sapsucker also likes fruit. When there was no mockingbird around, the sapsucker gorged itself.

On one return trip to a different location, I watched another mockingbird defend a dogwood tree from Northern Flickers and sapsuckers. Its food supply was under siege. The

mockingbird defended the tree successfully except for an attack by a crow-sized Pileated Woodpecker. Gradually my heart softened toward mockingbirds.

It was an amazing interaction with the mocker and the Pileated and other woodpeckers that occasionally swooped in. The smaller woodpeckers were dispatched immediately; however, the mocker never challenged the big guy but stayed a safe distance away and gave it that menacing mockingbird glare.

Interested in more tales of winter survival? I highly recommend *Winter World: the Ingenuity of Animal Survival* by Bernd Heinrich. His stories tell of unique and miraculous winter survival strategies for a wide range of wildlife in western Maine including birds, squirrels, honeybees, bears, and butterflies.

John Ennis



In the mocker's absence, the sapsucker enjoys the fruit of its labor



A crow-sized Pileated Woodpecker hangs upside down, foraging like a much smaller song bird



Pileated Woodpeckers love dogwood berries



...and holly trees to guard

Epilogue

-----Original Message-----

From: John Ennis [mailto:johnxennis@bellsouth.net]

Sent: Saturday, February 06, 2010 9:17 AM

To: carolinabirds@duke.edu

Subject: Cedar Waxwings and Winter Berry Supplies

I've monitored the berries and birds at Brunswick Community College a couple of times a week since Christmas...

I've previously posted photos of the battle between a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and pair of mockers over Bradford pear trees and, in another campus location, a battle between a Pileated Woodpecker and the mockingbird owners of a dogwood tree...

BCC has a number of areas with great berry supplies, each appearing to be defended by a pair of mockers...

All berry sources are close to being depleted...

Thursday, I arrived around 8 AM and saw a flock of waxwings landing in a nearby Bradford pear tree...they were between me and the sun so I started to circle around to get the morning sun behind me...

A nest-bound eagle flew over (carrying a snake) and the waxwings seemed not to notice; however, a minute later, before I could get into place, the waxwings were dispatched by a pair of mockers...

The waxwings flew over a nearby building and I headed to the other side hoping to intercept them...turns out, they were landing on a smaller tree, with plenty of berries, and allowed me to get very close as they proceeded with their feeding frenzy...

Here are a few of the photos...

<http://thebusinessbirder.com/CEDW.pdf>

<http://thebusinessbirder.com/CEDW2.pdf>