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Early August is customarily one of the low points in the birding year in this region. Most local birds have entered their moulting period. They have ceased singing, and are skulking in the depths of dark retreats in the underbrush. Very often they are so quiet and so hard to find that many people think they have already left the nieghborhood. This, of course, is not true. Yet, unless they are diligently sought out in their retreats they will hardly be noticed at all. Nor has southward migration begun to any extent at this time, though a few shore birds are on the move. All in all the bird watcher may suffer puzzling frustration in this mid-summer low period. However, as always, there are exceptions to the general rule; and it is about one of those exceptions that I wish to give an account.

August 1 arrived a dark and cloudy day, one of many, this cool, wet summer. Such a day does not often prevent good birders from embarking upon an expedition but when the trip is to be to some distant point hesitation may be more intense. So on this day when we planned to visit the Niagara Peninsula we debated some time before deciding to risk the weather. As we sped along the Queen Elizabeth Way the clouds still hung low and dark but now we -- Henry and Margaret Marsh and I -- were well launched upon our venture, and were ready for whatever should come.

At Burlington we turned off the highway to take a look at the harbor, and were mightily pleased that we had. Though many small boats were moored along the breakwall and in the harbor water two pairs of Holboell's grebes were at home there. At first glance we saw no grebe but one soon appeared in the eastern end of the harbour, swimming forcefully with a large burden of green grasses and water weeds in its beek. It soon arrived at a floating green mass, made up of such grasses and weeds, and at once began to pile up its new contribution on the mass, weaving in the loose ends cursorily. When this was accomplished the grebe swam back toward the eastern edge of the harbor, where it began to assemble another

load. A mate appeared, swimming and diving near it, but making only vague gestures towards helping with the grass-gathering. All the material was torn up from a watery bed. No attempt was made to get anything from shore. When the second load was brought and placed the grebe took time to move a white object on top of the mass, an egg that had been almost wholly covered by the green. Here then was a nest, a floating nest.

We watched this pair of grebes for several minutes before realizing that there was another pair in the harbor. Their presence was brought to our attention when, for no apparent reason, the pair we had been observing decided to quit their work, and to set out on a jaunt. They drew close together and swam determinedly towards the centre of the harbor. They had not advanced twenty-five feet before a cackling laugh sounded from a hidden part of the harbor to the west. At once this was answered by one of our birds. We hurried along the bank and soon saw the grebe that had first called, and beyond it another similar floating nest with this bird's mate sitting on it. The cackling laughs were repeated again and again, mounting in intensity. Warning and defiance -- the easterners were invading the territory of the western pair.

No move was made by the defenders until the intruding pair had passed the eastern entrance in the breakwall. Then with an impassioned rush the male (?) shot skittering over the water towards the invaders. He dropped down into the water, swimming furiously, stretching his head and neck out almost straight, though with a slight crook at the nape of the neck, looking all the world like an angry snake racing to strike at its foe. A few feet before he came up to the oncoming pair he dove and in a moment there was confusion for he obviously came up directly under the intruding male (?) upsetting him and provoking a thrashing of wings and splashing of water. The direct encounter was too much for the defender's mate. She (?) left the nest and rushed for the scene of battle, flying half the distance, and arriving just as the males separated. The two pairs now faced each other like two contending forces. They rent the air with their raucous laughter to which was now added a rough, rasping croak, somewhat like a mixture of a mallard's <u>quack</u> and a crow's <u>cruck</u>, offered in venomous, low tones. In a moment the defending male made another diving attack on his enemy. Once more confusion reigned. When the scene cleared the pair again lined up and passed uncomplimentary remarks. Four times this occurred until on the fourth occasion the easterners lost heart and started to retreat, hurling epithets back over their heads all the while. Now the defending male became too valiant for, head on water, he swam savagely across the entrance in the breakwall. The moment he reached the opposite side of the gap the retreating easterners whirled about, and the male of that pair dashed madly at the rushing swimmer. Again water splashed, wings beat, confusion prevailed. But this time the western male retreated. The pairs once more lined up facing each other and exchanged insults. What had happened was very clear. The western male in his urgency overswam the boundary line between the two territories. Hence the easterner, now defending his own water, could summon sufficient courage to drive off the same one before whom a moment earlier he had been retreating. The name-calling of the pairs lined up on this last occasion was an obvious declaration of

property rights over an invisible line, but one as surely known, and as sharply marked, as if a hundred strands of wire had been stretched across the harbor from breakwall to inner shore! It was as perfect a demonstration of birds' territorial ownership as I have ever seen. With the final salvo of remarks over, the two pairs turned backs to each other and returned to their nests. The eastern pair began renewed construction, both helping, the female (?) getting up on the nest in order to rearrange the materials. The western pair divided with the female (?) returning to her brooding, and the male gathering a few weeds to add to the nest.

A new problem offered itself. Why were these grebes choosing to construct such floating nests when several shallow, flat-bottomed boxes had been placed around the harbor for their use, and which in past years they have used? The boxes -- three or four of them -- were in full view. There seemed to be nothing wrong with them but the grebes paid no attention to them at all. To our way of thinking the floating masses of grass and weeds seemed much more fragile, much more vulnerable to destruction from rough water -- say from the wash of passing motor boats -- than did the boxes. Have they already had nests in the boxes which have somehow been destroyed so that the birds have developed a fear of boxes? Or are they reverting to a more "natural" nest of the sort they would build in some marsh of the western prairies? No satisfactory answer to this query offered itself to our minds. (Later investigation of the literature showed this type of nest to be the ordinary kind.) The sight of four other grebes far out in the lake suggested the possibility that the birds in the harbor might have had first broods and were now attempting a second nesting. We could not tell from shore if the birds on the lake were young birds so this idea too remained but a speculation.

Near the western pair's nest was a third floating nest. It had one egg too but no birds in attendance. The blackness of the mass making up the nest showed that it had not been refreshed for some time. This was an abandoned nest. Did it belong to the western pair. If so, why did they leave it to build again a few feet away? Or is it possible that this pair had ousted the pair now building at the eastern end; and that that pair had been making a righteous effort to recover their lost nest?

The nests were roughly circular in shape, about two feet in diameter, large enough for one grebe to mount on to the nest and to sit there with a few inches to spare around its body. At first we thought the nests looked to loosely made and too flimsy to hold so large a bird. But in both cases it was demonstrated that this was not so. However, in each nest the egg was obviously resting in water that came through the bottom of the nest. I take it this makes no difference.

We withdrew hoping that these beautiful red-necked grebes that have so inexplicably taken up residence in this populated harbor would again this year be able to raise families without mishap. We had been granted an insight into their lives that comes to few, especially to those who live in the east far away from the normal haunts of the Holboell's grebe. (How privileged

we had been I did not realize until upon getting home I found that A.C. Bent in Life Histories of North American Diving Birds makes no mention of the performance we had seen, this dramatic episode in the life of what Bent designates as "certainly one of the shyest of water birds". Nor is it described in any other book I have been able to consult.)

Selby's

After crossing Burlington Cut-off we left the Queen Elizabeth Way and took the road up the escarpment. Patches of low-hanging cloud still threatened rain. By the time we neared Fonthill, however, the clouds were lifting. We drew off the road to a woodlot where we ate lunch before going to our destination.

About 1:30 we turned into the estate of Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Selby, our goal. The Selbys were expecting us, welcomed us cordially, and soon were showing us around the estate to which they retired five years ago. Since then they have taken up the hobby of feeding and studying hummingbirds; and their success has brought them to the attention of ornithologists all over America.

They have a large house, placed high on the escarpment at the edge of the Lookout Point Golf Course. Their land abuts upon the golf course, and they look down across its long green stretches to wooded valleys that reach away for miles to Lake Ontario. On a clear day they can even see the taller buildings in Toronto across the lake; and on favorable nights the lights of the Toronto waterfront twinkle in the distance. A velvety lawn bounds the house on three sides while a hedge of shrubs, trees and flowers marks off the Selby grounds from the golf course. Down the escarpment to the back of the house tumbles a leafy wood, thick with the inviting undergrowth that is so pleasing to birds and all wild creatures. An ideal situation this in which to go about the hobby of attracting birds. The only lack is a nearby water supply, and this has been overcome by bird baths placed near the edge of the woods. Though they love all birds the Selbys are devoting themselves first of all to hummers.

Of their success we quickly had tangible proof. Ruby-throats whizzed past us from all directions. As we followed the dashing mites with our eyes we could see that they were bound to and from the several feeders which are placed at intervals around the house. Three of these -- there are nine in all -- are placed a few yeards below the house in back, fixed against the trunks of trees. These we could watch at leisure whilst we sat in garden chairs on the lawn a few arms' reach away. Ruby-throated males, white-necked females and young, whizzed past us, each bird selecting the feeder it preferred. Often two hummers tried to get onto the same feeder at the same time. Much high, metallic chatter ensued, and some belligerent darting at each other until one bird gave way. When satisfied a hummer would often fly to a nearby twig and sit for some time looking around. Usually the bird that had fed would fly off into the trees, probably to carry its burden of sweetness to eager nestlings.

This year the Selbys have found thirteen nests within three hundred feet of the house! Last year they had seven. And when they began their feeding five years ago there was but one pair in the vicinity. We were shown three of these nests, tiny, grey cups strapped onto branches well above the ground. Two were about twenty feet up, the third a little higher, from twenty-five to thirty feet. One was affixed along the straight horizontal part of a branch, sitting upright on top of the branch between two twigs; the other two were placed in small crotches at the ends of small branches. All three were well situated beneath a leafy cover, no doubt a protection against sun, if not rain. Two of the nests were occupied, or had been until recently. The third had blackened and shrunk, showing that it had been abandoned for some time. No reason for the abandonment was known to the Selbys. I wondered how such tiny structures, placed so close to the ends of branches could withstand heavy winds and storms. Mr. Selby said they had not had the violent thunder storms that had swept over Toronto during the past week so these nests had escaped this test; still it is a trial they must have to endure many times. Seemingly they are tougher, and more durable than they appear to be. Down from cattail bulrushes is the basic component of the nest. The Selbys had placed a tall, well-filled bulrush near each of several feeders; and it was evident that these had been generously drawn upon by the hummingbirds. The interior of the nest made of this material becomes loosely felted with use, and feels like furry cotton batting. The outside of the nest is strengthened and protected with a coating of lichens.

The feeders used by the Selbys are shallow, round glass or plastic dishes, three to four inches in diameter and an inch and a half deep. They are covered with red plastic covers. In these six or eight holes have been bored so that the birds can dip their long bills into the syrup inside. They are placed on the trunks of trees, and on window sills. The birds use them all but seemed to show preference for one or two that sit close to an ornamental evergreen; perhaps because this represents close refuge from danger. The syrup is sugar and water -- one part sugar, two parts water. So far this season two and a half gallons had been consumed!!

The Selbys have naturally learned much about hummingbirds. All their nesting birds, for instance, they find have young in the nest for 21 days. The time given in the literature ranges from 6 - 28 days. They have taken to banding their birds but so far only the young birds after leaving the nest for fear the nests would be abandoned. Last year they banded 22 birds; and three of these returned this spring. Regular government bird bands cannot be used because of their size. Mr. Selby has made bands of his own by breaking an old gold watch chain and painting the rings. He is using a different color for each year so that birds of the year may be distinguished but not individuals. At present he is hoping to devise some way of using regular government bands so that individual birds may be recognized. Apparently little banding of hummingbirds has been done anywhere, probably because of the difficulty with the ordinary bands.

In addition to their devotion to hummers the Selbys have created a Study House by converting an old chicken house into a small museum and study. This stands in the wood below their home. In it are many small but stimulating exhibits; nature photographs, blueprints of leaves, a seasonal bird calendar, nests locally obtained, a chart of birds occurring on the Niagara Peninsula, a working collection of books -- manuals, guides, etc., a case with two live milk snakes, another with blue-tailed skinks. This Study House is made available to local youngsters, and to people such as scout leaders and nature teachers, who come from as far as Welland, Thorold, and St. Catherines to make use of it. While we were there two boys, one a recent Dutch immigrant, came bringing a robin's nest. Clearly the Selbys are arousing a great deal of interest in bird study and nature in their community, and are much to be congratulated on this.

After we had visited around the grounds our host suggested that we might like to visit Mud Lake near Welland. They described a fascinating marsh, unknown to us: of course we readily agreed, for what is more alluring than a first-class marsh. This one turned out to be every bit as interesting as they had suggested; and was especially so to me for in it we found the first American egret I have seen in two years. This was the first egret to arrive this season but last year, we are told, around the middle of August there were eleven egrets at this marsh! Besides the egret we saw many other birds -- 40 coots, sundry great blue herons, mallards, pied-billed grebes, wood duck, solitary sandpipers, spotties, gallinules, a black-crowned night heron, and above all a ruddy duck. I say, above all, because it was here, two years ago that Mrs. Selby made a great find, the first breeding record of ruddy ducks for Ontario. Last year she did not find them. And this year she had seen none before today. This ruddy was a male. Whether it was one of a nesting pair was impossible to say. Its presence at this time was suggestive.

Mud Lake is an artificial creation made at the time of the building of the new Welland Canal. It is surrounded by a high dyke (8'-10'), and was partially filled with detritus from the canal bed, but not entirely, so that a marsh formed. It is about half a mile long by a third of a mile wide, and has a good stretch of open water that can be easily surveyed from the top of the dyke. Easy of approach, yet reasonably isolated from too many people it provides an excellent refuge and a very satisfactory point of observation. The Selbys told us that it is carefully and regularly scrutinized by the Buffalo naturalists. The Toronto observers should certainly pay more heed to this excellent spot.

We drove back to the Selbys' home and there had tea, enjoying all the while the steady parade of hummingbirds visiting the feeding dishes at the window sills. The Selby house, we saw, is full of mementos left by visiting naturalists in appreciation of hospitality. Outstanding were drawings by Frances Lee Jaques, who visited the Selbys and mentioned them in her charming book, Birds Across the Sky.

We parted with our friendly host and hostess around 5:45, receiving warm invitations to come again. And return we certainly shall, if not before, then next May when the humming birds come back from the south and this hillside home will be surrounded by snowy white dogwood blooms wherein the springtime hummers perform their nuptial flights.

A day that had promised so little at the start had turned out to be one of thrilling experiences and unalloyed delight.

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During the summer I have received two letters regarding the question of the residence of predatory birds near feeding stations, which I give here as interesting contributions to that discussion. The first letter is from Mr. H. Roy Ivor of Erindale, whose aviary is well-known; the second is from Mrs. Doris H. Speirs, President of our Junior Club.

Mr. Ivor writes: "The friendly controversy concerning the wisdom or otherwise of giving haven to bird predators near feeding stations -- in the present instance to the screech owl -- has been brought to my attention by a member of your club and I have been asked to comment upon it. I trust that in so doing I am not taking too great a liberty.

Considering carefully the sample arguments you cite, both for and against, it seems to me that, so far as you report them, they have not been backed up by sufficient thought and investigation. In the first place, the screech owl we have with us always -- providing we have nearby woods. To judge from my experience they are far more numerous than is generally known. Carrying on an intimate study of emotive bird behaviour for nearly twenty years, with conditioned native birds as subjects, I have found it necessary to eliminate screech owls from the vicinity. The reason for such attempted exclusion is that birds nesting in the song-bird observatory are given liberty during the nesting season. During incubation it is usually possible to shut them in before dusk, but when the young are hatched the parents must have liberty from dawn until dark and this entails leaving their entrance gate open at all times. It also means that the male--and the female, after the period of keeping them warm is over--may prefer to roost in the trees outside the observatory instead of inside. This naturally leaves them open to attack by screech owls. As it sometimes takes years to condition a bird so that it may be studied intimately, its loss to an owl is a serious set-back to study. In all these years I never have succeeded in keeping the woods free of screech owls for any considerable length of time. Thus it may be seen that the placing of a barrel near a feeding station will, in all probability, not constitute any added danger to the station visitors, as the hunting territory of a pair of these owls, and their young when flighted, probably takes in an area of from 15 to 20 acres at least. I think that the foregoing covers the argument: 'that to invite predators to hang around and live on small birds...' If we do not want predators to hang

around then we must forgo the pleasure--and at times the help to the birds-- of attracting birds to a feeding station, for, wherever birds congregate in numbers, whether naturally as with so many social birds, or unnaturally at a feeding station, we shall find predators looking for easy pickings. To my mind the "balance of nature" does not enter into this picture.

"The argument supporting the view: 'I am glad to see that there is one owner of a feeding station who is not trying to domesticate the visiting birds out of all their normal reactions of defence, but is keeping them on their toes' is not valid for two reasons. Firstly: The strongest, most alert -- the perfect specimen of their kind -- is not on 'its toes' when the screech owl hunts its prey. It is every bit as vulnerable as its weaker brother. (See 'The Eyes of Birds', Nature Magazine, March 1950.) Secondly: Conditioned birds, whether conditioned by the attractions of the feeding station or by hand rearing do not lose their normal reactions of defence, nor any of their fundamental characteristics. One has only to watch the exceedingly alert actions of the conditioned downy woodpecker as he is feeding on suet. For every bite he takes he examines the surroundings critically several times for bird predators. Lack of, or partial lack of fear for human beings acquired through conditioning is no more than learning. I shall present two cases out of many to prove my contentions.

"Some years ago I had in my observatory four adult rose-breasted grosbeaks. The two females and one male were hand-reared and exceedingly trustful, trustful to such an extent that I could handle their eggs and young without the least resentment on their part. The other male was a wild bird that had been attracted to the observatory and I allowed him to stay. He proved to be untamable while I had him. In the nine months before nesting time he was as wild, fearful, and unconditioned except for becoming used to the observatory, as a similar bird in the wild. Each male mated with a female. Each pair reared a full brood in the observatory, having the usual outdoor liberty of my nesting birds. Each pair nested a second time outside the observatory and again reared full broods -- in all, 13 young. That constituted 100% success, nearly twice that of the average songbird of any species, and in itself is a good criterion of the effects of conditioning. That success meant that I had 17 rose-breasts. While these adults were nesting a Cooper's hawk also nested at a distance of about 100 yards from the observatory. I lost, to one of this pair of hawks, one rose-breast. That one was the wild male.

"Little Blue is a male bluebird. In June of this year (1950) he will be nine years old. Year after year he has nested and had from two to four months liberty during the nesting seasons. There have been many bird predators in the vicinity while he had his liberty. Little Blue today is just as alert to hawks as he was when a year old. He knows, and shows he knows, whether a hawk in the far distance is an accipiter or a buteo. If it is an accipiter and not hunting he sounds the alert. If it is hunting and coming near he sounds the danger signal. He, as well as all the others, will immediately "freeze" for many minutes after the danger has passed."

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Mrs. Speirs states that: "At Cobble Hill (Pickering) we have made a nail keg into a nesting box for a screech owl, and have placed this at the edge of the woods. A pair of crested flycatchers seem interested in it at the moment, and we shall be glad if they nest there. However, a pair of screech owls would keep down the field mice population. Forbush (1925, Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States: 218) has written: "The Screech Owl gets its sustenance chiefly from mice and insects. It is very destructive to field mice, house mice, cutworms, grasshoppers, locusts and other pests. It eats many noxious nocturnal moths and many beetles -- seems, in short, to have a marked predilection for destructive insects. Usually it seems to kill only small numbers of birds and seldom troubles poultry or game-birds. All one season I watched a pair that were rearing a brood near my cottage. We found in and about their nesting box feathers from several Blue Jays, other from a male Red-winged Blackbird and the wing of one Robin. All the pellets and other refuse from their food that season showed only remains of mice, shrews and insects. We concluded that the destruction of the Blue Jays was a benefit as there were too many of them, and they fed to some extent on the eggs and young of other birds. While the owls were there, the mice did no damage in our young orchard, but two years later their box fell down and was not replaced for the next two years. The second winter mice girdled nearly all our apple trees. The next year a number of boxes were erected. The owls returned and we had no trouble from mice thereafter."

"It would seem that screech owls are needed in nature's economy.

"While thinking about the predator-prey problem this morning, I reread a wonderful letter received in 1948 from Louise de Kiriline Lawrence (author of 'The Loghouse Nest'). That year a pair of pigeon hawks nested above Pimisi Bay. Louise made careful observations of all their doings. She writes in their defence: '....a Pigeon Hawk NEVER hunts except for food. When the time has come for feeding he goes out to hunt, but he waits until then no matter what he sees or hears that could be taken more easily than when he sets out to capture prey. And with all his prowess as a hunter he does not easily come by his living because his prey is swift, alert and past masters in making use of available cover. Secondly he never, or hardly ever, hunts on his own territory. I have never seen it. He goes out far and wide, miles, into haunts he probably visits fairly regularly and in turn. This morning the hillside where the nest is teemed with small birds, noisy Chickadees, shy Thrushes, a Phoebe and a Pewee, both conspicuous flycatchers waiting for flies on open branches and in tops of "chicots", the Phoebe even catching flies in the nesting tree below the nest while the Hawk sat on the top of a "chicot" after having fed the young and watched without moving a feather; Purple Finches going through, resting to sing song after

song; Song-sparrows, Whitethroats, meals upon meals upon which the Hawk could have fed if he had been hungry. But he wasn't hungry and perhaps they all knew it. Down below a bright-coloured Canada Warbler is nesting and a Wilson's Thrush and an Olive-backed with two young in the nest and on the crest of the hill a Nashville and a Myrtle. They have been there all the time I have been with the Hawks and are still there. No, the Hawk does not hunt on his own territory .....'

"Other naturalists have noticed this same phenomenon: another fact on the Credit side of the ledger."

Richard M. Saunders

Editor.