

RELATIONSHIPS OF BIRDS TO POWER AND COMMUNICATION LINES

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The eminent ornithologist, Dr. Elliott Coues (1876) was much concerned with the numbers of birds killed by flying into telegraph wires. On a trip between Denver, Colorado and Cheyenne, Wyoming, he counted a hundred dead birds in about three miles. He was convinced that "many hundred thousand" birds died in like manner annually. He concluded that "since we cannot conveniently abolish the telegraph, we must be content with fewer birds".

Coues apparently entertained little hope that birds could learn to avoid this newly-introduced hazard; yet such appears to be the case. It appears to this observer that the balance has shifted, and that power and communication lines now represent a valuable asset to bird life.

An important use made of such structures by birds is the use of the poles for nests. Hole-nesting birds are often hard-pressed to find suitable nesting sites in the present defrosted condition of much of our country, especially in areas where large trees are scarce or where tree sanitation is practiced. The thousands of poles offer a ready-made substitute. Such behavior, though applauded by bird-lovers, does not meet with the approval of the utility companies and pole manufacturers. The July-August, 1954, issue of Audubon Magazine carries an offer of \$100, made by the Osmose Wood Preserving Company of Buffalo, for the "best commercially practicable idea to prevent woodpeckers from impairing standing pole strength".

In New York, I have observed nests of the yellow-shafted flicker, house wren, eastern bluebird and starling in utility line poles. Many other species have been reported from such sites. The importance of these poles in areas where large trees are few is indicated by the fact that Simmons (1925) lists eight species as using poles for nesting holes around Austin, Texas.

Cross-bars and transformer boxes also present desirable nesting sites for many birds. The adaptable robin has taken to utilizing these structures extensively. On Long Island and in coastal New Jersey, ospreys regularly nest on the tops of poles. The New York Times of August 16, 1951, reported the plight of power company officials whose Long Island power lines were continually short-circuited by wet seaweed which the ospreys dragged over the wires on the way to their pole-top nests. Eventually, extra poles with platforms were placed along the regular lines. Baited with sticks, the platforms proved more attractive to the ospreys than did the poles. The New York Telephone Company is reported as having erected similar nest poles. In the southwest, the scissor-tailed flycatcher frequently nests on cross-bars and transformer boxes, and several other species have been reported from such locations.

Birds which depend for their livelihood on observation perches have found poles and wires much to their liking. Sparrow hawks and shrikes are among the most consistent users of this method of hunting. The list of insectivorous birds which use the wires as a base from which to sally forth is extensive.

The value of poles and wires also includes their use as song-perches, as sites for mating activities, and as places on which to stand guard while the mate is on the nest. Cowbirds regularly perform their courtship on wires. Upland plovers habitually perch on the top of a pole or on a wire during the nesting period. Robins, red-wings, mourning doves, and many others are characteristically seen on wires, either singing or standing guard.

The hordes of swallows which line the wires during migration may cause one to wonder what these birds used for perches before the wires were available. Possibly bank swallows, tree swallows and rough-winged swallows have increased in number in recent years, or perhaps they formerly roosted in marshes. If so, it seems fortuitous that wires replaced the marshes, which have been largely destroyed for agricultural use.

If local records were available over long periods of time for some of the relatively treeless areas of the west, it is possible that range extensions of certain birds, at least locally, could be traced to the addition of poles for nesting sites. The attraction of such sites is graphically illustrated by the following letter by H. P. Attwater, who wrote to Bendire (1895) concerning the golden-fronted woodpecker:

"A telegraph line running out of San Antonio to a ranch nine miles distance was almost destroyed by these birds; they came from all sides, from far and near, and made fresh holes every year, sometimes as many as five or six in a single pole".

Eugene Eisenmann has informed me that certain hawks in Panama, once considered rare in that locality, have increased in numbers as transmission lines have provided nesting sites, and are now common in some of the more settled areas.

What seemed to Coues to be a necessary evil seems to have proved to be a blessing in disguise. Though a certain number of birds will continue to be killed in various ways by utility lines, a vastly greater number will find such lines useful adjuncts in the business of breeding, feeding, and resting.

Literature cited

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AN UNUSUAL KILLDEER NESTING

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During the last week of May, 1953, Mr. Ralph H. Shone, who works in an office near my own on Wilkeson Street in downtown Buffalo, called me to look at some young birds on the roof of the building. I found the birds to be young Killdeers, about a week old. I took a short series of motion pictures of the young on June 2, and asked that the birds be watched to see if they grew to maturity. One adult was especially solicitous of the young, and