

LITERATURE CITED

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An Interspecific Forage Band Predator Alarm Almost Backfires: When walking in the winter forests of New York State one may meet mixed-species groups of birds moving along together in loose associations searching for food. These groups, known technically as interspecific forage bands, usually include members of the tit, nuthatch, creeper, kinglet, and woodpecker families. Similar interspecific forage bands are found in winter temperate zone forests in many parts of the world and have been the focus of much research. These bands are believed to allow more efficient use of limited winter food supplies. A secondary advantage of interspecific banding is that they provide a better predator alarm system, theoretically because the many eyes and ears of the band make it less probable that a predator could approach undetected. When one band member spots a predator its calls alert the whole band. However, this alarm system may backfire as shown by an incident I witnessed while studying interspecific forage bands in Monroe County during the winter of 1973-74.

On the morning of 1/20/74 I was following a band composed of 8 Black-capped Chickadees, 2 White-breasted Nuthatches, 2 Brown Creepers, and a Red-bellied Woodpecker moving through a section of deciduous woods in the southeast corner of Mendon Ponds Park. As usual the foraging birds ignored me as I watched quietly from a distance, recording data. As the band moved along it was joined by 6 Tufted Titmice and 2 Golden-crowned Kinglets. They, too, ignored me at first. However, as I started to move to a new observation position the titmice began calling in alarm and proceeded to 'mob' me. (Mobbing is a group action typically directed at a potential predator which is not actually threatening the group at the moment; for instance crows and jays will mob owls in the daytime). The nuthatches and some of the chickadees joined the mobbing titmice, approaching me and scolding loudly.

Thus far the band's predator alarm system had functioned as it should. A potential predator (myself) had been recognized and the alarm sounded. However, while most of the band was preoccupied with me, a real predator was approaching. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a Cooper's Hawk flying swiftly through the trees toward the band, attracted, I believe, by the noise of the mobbing birds. As the hawk passed less than 20 feet over my head, it noticed me for the first time and veered sharply away. Only then did the mobbing birds of the interspecific forage band see the hawk and fall silent.

This example demonstrates that while the interspecific forage band alarm system may help warn members of potential predators, its activation against one predator may absorb the attention of the members, making them vulnerable to other predators which may actually be attracted by the functioning alarm system.

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