

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Gadwall Mating Display: Nowadays, hardly anyone can emulate the leisurely studies that took Audubon throughout eastern North America in search of birds. But in spite of our limited periods of time devoted to bird study, we may make valuable contributions to ornithology. There must be a willingness to put on hold the headlong rush that takes us from county to county, and from state to state. Seeking the broad spectrum of bird life often blinds us to the details, and robs us of the time needed to ferret out the small wonders we may discover. These revelations, of habit or instinct, are so intimate and fleeting they can easily be missed. As in psychology, "everything means something"; and that maxim is relevant to bird study.

The above paragraph in no way deprecates the bird from the distant place, whose appearance stirs laggards and active bird watchers. But the almost mathematical certainty of rare birds being sighted each season should make these unique finds less astonishing. Of course, we all are excited by the alerts, especially when we have been first and can spread the news broadly. Recalling the far place the bird has wandered from, with a little imagination, adds a fillip to any birder's day. A blood-stirring sight helps us on the dull bird watching trips that are numerous between such events.

You may be assured that I had little of the foregoing in mind a few years ago when I recorded the incident that follows.

On a cool clear day, 16 Nov. 1975, I explored Spuyten Duyvil, on the north end of Manhattan. The usual land and water birds were present, as I walked to the end of the peninsula that separates the two coves, just west of the Columbia University boat house. At the end of the peninsula, facing west toward the Hudson River, the mouth of the curved cove held a small flock of ducks. It was a flock of eleven Gadwalls, about fifty yards from me. The count alone was unusual, for the species rarely numbered more than four or five birds in this locale. There were periods when the duck was absent for a year or more. When the bird was present it generally stayed until late April, giving false hopes of breeding. The Gadwalls were seen on occasion to fly toward Jerome Park Reservoir, where they were recorded at times. During the week previous and the week following, two birds were present at Spuyten Duyvil.

As I examined the flock, counting males and females, three birds, two drakes and a duck broke away from the balance of the group. As the female swam slowly toward the Harlem Ship Canal, the males followed at her flanks, nudging her as if to impede her passage. At this point, as the trio held their positions, the two males simultaneously fluffed out their head feathers into feathery balls, while opening their bills wide, revealing bright yellow mouth-linings. At the same time the wing feathers of the primaries and secondaries were compressed vertically, showing off the almost concealed speculum in flashing white, cinnamon

and black. Thus there was the puffy head, the yellow mouth-lining and the exposed colors and patterns of the speculum, presented to the female as a triple stimuli. The entire display lasted less than fifteen seconds. The males then reverted to the modest shape and pattern of the other males, and the three birds swam back to the flock.

When the Gadwall was first found breeding locally at Tobay Pond, Jones Beach, L.I. (1947), the birds were noted in nuptial flights around the pond and over the edge of the ocean. These pursuing flights were typical courting procedures. What other antics and postures were achieved on the ground and in the water, unfortunately were never watched. The land around the pond was not conducive to close observation, and the trips to the area were generally a week apart. No other evidence was sighted except the obvious flights above the nesting grounds. The shoving and nudging the males administer to the females, along with pecking and striking with the bill, preceding copulation, is well-documented. The actions described above appear to be a new, or rarely noted sexual display.

This fortuitous observation might never have been made if I had arrived minutes later, for though the birds were watched for a half an hour after the exhibition, nothing resembling the act was seen.

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