

Red-winged Blackbird Attacks Spotted Sandpiper: Anyone who has a bird feeder has probably observed skirmishes among birds of the same species. When birding, we often see smaller birds mobbing larger birds such as the Red-tailed Hawk and Great Horned Owl. Less often (but often with greater and more dramatic consequences) we see an attack of a larger species on a smaller species. I believe that I have observed only three territorial attacks of a larger species on a smaller species, one a Herring Gull attack on a Bonaparte's Gull, one a Common Grackle attack on a House Sparrow and one a Red-winged Blackbird attack on a Spotted Sandpiper. One of these attacks was fatal to the bird attacked and the other two appeared to be life threatening.

The most recent and perhaps least vicious of these attacks involved the Red-winged Blackbird attack in the Spotted Sandpiper seen on 30 April 1989 at Times Beach in Buffalo. As I was watching an early Spotted Sandpiper on the mud flats at Times Beach, a Red-winged Blackbird started harassing it. As the Red-winged Blackbird dove at the Spotted Sandpiper, the Spotted Sandpiper was unable to find protection on the ground. In an attempt to escape, the Spotted Sandpiper flew away from the mud flats and marsh reeds over the water in the direction of the breakwall. However, the tenacious Red-winged Blackbird continued to dive at the back of the Spotted Sandpiper until the Spotted Sandpiper was half way to the breakwall. At this point, the Red-winged Blackbird soared up about thirty feet above the Spotted Sandpiper and I thought the Red-winged Blackbird had finally given up the attack. Much to my surprise, instead of giving up the attack, the Red-winged Blackbird plunged down on the Spotted Sandpiper from this greatest of heights forcing the poor Spotted Sandpiper down into the water. The Spotted Sandpiper flew no more. The Red-winged Blackbird continued to fly

over the spot where the Spotted Sandpiper had disappeared, at times hovering five or ten feet over the fateful location as though it was doing a victory dance. Finally, after what seemed to be at least ten seconds, the Red-winged Blackbird returned to the cattails of the marsh. Then to my further amazement I saw the Spotted Sandpiper rise from the water like a phoenix and resume its flight successfully to the breakwall. I can not say what happened to the Spotted Sandpiper while it was in the water. Although I observed this event through binoculars, the distance of about 80 yards made it difficult to determine if the Spotted Sandpiper was forced under water or (perhaps more likely) it waited at the surface undetected by me until after the Red-winged Blackbird had given up its attack. Perhaps someone who has had the good fortune to observe a similar encounter but at closer range can tell me exactly what that Spotted Sandpiper was doing.

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