

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) CANNIBALISM AT ONEIDA LAKE

On 30 Jun 2006, at Oneida Lake, Onondaga County, New York, Jeremy Coleman, Jake FitzRoy, and I witnessed a rare event in the biology of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*): we observed an approximately 8-10 day old chick feeding upon a dead conspecific chick of about 1-2 days age (Fig. G, p. 324). We watched for about 30-45 minutes as the larger chick tried to swallow the dead conspecific, and by the time we had left, it had made very little to no progress on swallowing the chick whole. Although we witnessed the act of cannibalism while it was happening, we did not see how the smaller chick came to be in the mouth of the larger one; that is to say, the chick could have picked up the conspecific off the ground, or the parents could have fed their chick the dead conspecific. We recorded the band number of the chick trying to eat its conspecific, but never again found this chick, alive or dead.

I believe this rare event was related to the unusual weather conditions that were occurring at the time. Two days previous, a large storm produced over 4" of rain at Oneida Lake, which caused a rise in the lake level. The island on which the terns nest is less than two feet high and at a gentle slope, so many nests were therefore quite susceptible to flood damage. From this event, approximately 40% of the island's surface and some 20% of the nests were flooded. This act of cannibalism could have been influenced by the flood because the water was turbid from sediment and many chicks had died from direct and indirect causes (e.g., death from drowning as well as territorial disputes due to movements between territories). As it became more difficult for adults to visualize prey-fish while foraging over the murky lake, a parent may have resorted to feeding a dead conspecific to its chick, as one of the few remaining options for food.

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A KETTLE OF TURKEY VULTURES (*Cathartes aura*) IN MID-JUNE ON LONG ISLAND

Eileen Schwinn and I observed a kettle of 11 Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) soaring over the grasslands at the Calverton grasslands (ex-Grumman property, Riverhead Town, Suffolk) for a quarter of an hour starting about 9 am on 12 Jun 2007. Such a sight would not be remarkable in most places in New York State but, until recently, even one Turkey Vulture would be unusual in mid-June on Long Island where there are no breeding records and where, before the last few years, even records of this species in migration were relatively uncommon.

A notable feature of the birds in the Calverton kettle was that many of them were in a battered plumage condition: a wing feather missing here and a tail feather there with a general tendency towards scraggly appearance. This was suggestive of breeding, brooding birds, (which often show feather loss or extensive wear) rather than a flock of late migrants.

Many other observations followed. Up to five Turkey Vultures were regularly seen during the rest of June and July on Route 105, the Westhampton-Riverhead Road, in or next to the Gabreski Airport, Dwarf Pine Plains and Sarnoff Preserve areas. On 17 Jul, Mary Laura Lamont and Carl Starace again saw 11 birds over Grumman. The distance between Grumman and Gabreski is less than eight miles with mostly open pine barrens in between. On 13 Jul 2007, Robert McGrath observed a bird soaring over Grassy Pond in the Peconic headwaters. According to his notes, "this individual had a few wing feathers missing and what appeared to be a featherless area back toward the legs. The bird came in from the south and drifted north and east from over the pond toward in the direction of the grasslands at Grumman." On 26 Jul 2007, he observed three birds over the southwest quadrant of the Dwarf Pine Plains. Again I quote from his notes: "One individual had tattered wing feathers on both wings. And another had what appeared to be a brood patch toward the lower belly area back by the legs."

I should add that Turkey Vulture nests are notoriously difficult to find. In the last Breeding Bird Atlas, Turkey Vulture was recorded almost everywhere in New York State except Long Island, but there were only a handful of confirmed breeding records. Although there is some anecdotal evidence that a few birds were present during previous breeding seasons, the sheer number of 2007 reports suggests a very recent colonization of eastern Long Island with a strong likelihood of breeding. Turkey Vultures certainly belong in that list of southern species whose populations are increasing to the north. It was first recorded as nesting in New York State in 1926 and the numbers increased through the rest of the century. I would venture to guess that, as long as some suitable habitat remains, proven nesting on Long Island is only a matter of time.

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