

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Notes on a Gray Jay Nest in Raquette Lake

On 6 March, 2012, after visiting the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch in Locust Grove, Lewis County, John and Kirsten Askildsen found Gray Jays building a nest in Raquette Lake, Hamilton County. They observed two adults actively nest-building, with 5-6 young birds closely associating with the adults, and foraging with the adults. The nest was mostly made of what looked like stripped birch bark, with twigs in between for support structure. The observers also saw one of the adult birds bringing in bits of fur.

Joan Collins visited the nest site on 12 March and found a bird on the nest either laying eggs or already sitting on eggs. It appeared to be a sensitive time, so she didn't stay. She described the nest site as along what seemed to be a popular walking road, about 6 feet up (John described it as eye level, but that is only from John's point of view!) in a small spruce tree at the edge of a cedar/spruce bog.

On 3 April, after a nearly three-week road trip, Joan visited the nest site again at 6:40 p.m. An adult was on the nest—she could see just the top of the bird's head and an eye peering out at her. The long tail was sticking up at a 45° angle out of the nest. It was a chilly 39° F and very windy and she didn't want the bird to flush, so she made it a quick drive-by. The bird was certainly either on eggs or brooding young.

On 18 April, Larry Master visited the Gray Jay nest between 7:30 and 11:00 a.m. There were four healthy-looking young in the nest that he guessed were at least 7-10 days away from fledging. Larry thought the nest might have a mite infestation as one of the adults spent a lot of time digging around in the nest and eating very small objects, observable in the videos he took. The pattern of parental care Larry observed and photographed is also interesting. One parent sat on the nest regularly, especially during the first hour when it was the coldest (30°). He took images each time the adults visited the nest, and figured the timing of visits to be every 10-15 minutes or so at first, but then quickly lengthening to every 30-45 minutes or so, with both parents typically coming in to the nest within a few minutes of each other. One video shows the transfer of food between the parents before feeding the young.

Strickland and Ouellet (2011: Gray Jay. *The Birds of North America Online*. Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology; <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/>) describe the behavior Larry had captured on video (the female grabbing food from male's bill to help feed young): "Initially male brings food to nest, shares it with female (who may remain sitting until food sharing), then both feed nestlings simultaneously. On days 2-5 male sometimes tries to feed nestlings directly; female seizes food from his bill, then feeds young. By day 5 (3 nestlings) or day 8 (2 nestlings), male starts resisting female's attempts to seize food and she

begins to accompany male on foraging trips.” Also described is the “nest jabbing” behavior observed by Larry (and thought to be associated with possible mite infestation): “From day 2-20 (mostly days 5-15) female puts head down in cup and repeatedly jabs at lining with sufficient force that nest and supporting branches are visibly shaken and nestlings, which may be on top of her head, jostled (DS, Rutter 1969, Blomgren 1964).” They suggest that this behavior might serve “to deepen and enlarge nest cup to accommodate growing nestlings and prolong their being surrounded by high insulative walls.” They also mention the choice of an opening along a bog, or road edge, with a southern exposure for the nest.

Larry didn’t hear any vocalizations from the jays—adults or young—but singing in the background were American Robins, Winter Wrens, White-throated Sparrows, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Tree Swallows, Blue Jays, and a Palm Warbler. As far as he could tell, the jays almost completely ignored him sitting in his vehicle directly opposite the nest, and ignored the half dozen trucks that drove by within a couple of meters, between his car and the nest tree. He suspected it wouldn’t have mattered if he had been standing outside the car, but didn’t want to chance it or leave his scent at the site.

On 20 April, Joan again stopped by the nest site, at 7:40 p.m. on a beautiful, unusually warm (mid 60°s) night for this time of year. There were four big babies “home alone” and muscling each other for room in the nest. They were still very young and likely to be in the nest for a while longer, but were now much bigger than when Larry had taken the video. There was no sign of a parent.

The next evening, 21 April, Joan drove by the nest on her way home from Binghamton at 6:55 p.m. in very different weather—it was 41° with a steady, light rain. She observed an adult covering the babies like an umbrella (no room IN the nest for the parent now) and even its tail was spread, looking not at all comfortable for the adult. Joan had anticipated this situation, and almost didn’t stop for fear of scaring the parent off the nest, so she observed with the car moving. Fortunately, the parent didn’t budge.

On 26 April, David Buckley and Joan stopped by the Gray Jay nest site hoping to see the four young babies before they fledged, but they were too late. Joan was quite certain that they had fledged, as there was no visible evidence that the nest had been predated. Joan called Larry, and he asked her to collect the nest. David and Joan stopped at a convenience store in Inlet and got a plastic bag. As they attempted to collect the nest, they found that it was actually at least 8 feet up in the spruce tree; it had appeared lower when the snow was on the ground. Joan was glad that, fortunately, no one was there to get video of their comical attempts at getting the nest down, which at one point included Joan suspended and hanging onto the trunk when she couldn’t balance on one foot in David’s hands! David was finally able to bend the tree down and they got the nest out perfectly intact (including all the fluffy material in the cup and the dangling branches described as typical for their nests).

The nest had been built at the intersection of a branch against the trunk and a branch from a nearby dead tree that was leaning against the spruce. When David broke off the dead branch, the nest didn't budge; it appeared to just be adding extra stability. The nest was quite big and barely fit in the plastic bag. Back home, Joan transferred it to a large kitchen-sized garbage bag and it took up a whole shelf in her basement freezer!

Eastern Birds' Nests (Hal H. Harrison, 1975), describes the Gray Jay nest and states that they are typically found between 6 and 8 feet up in a conifer. The 'Notes' section states: "Nests so early in snowbound northern woods (Feb–March) that few nests have been studied. Birds are suspected of hoarding or storing nest material (deer hair) before use in nesting. Good insulation is needed to protect eggs and young from temperatures which may drop below 0° Fahrenheit. Noisy, tame, and sociable at other seasons, Gray Jays are quiet and retiring during nesting period."

Gray Jay nests are seldom found; Chamberlaine (1998: Gray Jay. *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Cornell University Press), states that "The first recorded NY nest, a used one, was found during Atlas work at Long Pond outlet, St. Lawrence Co., 26 Jul 1983 by Medd and Mulligan (Atlas 1988; J. Ozard, pers. comm.)." This well studied example yielded interesting and useful data concerning a very localized breeder in New York State.

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PHOTO GALLERY
Winter 2012-13



Gray Jays, Raquette Lake, *Hamilton*, 18 Apr 2012, © Larry Master. A note describing this nesting is included in this issue, on pp. 97-99.