

THE RED-BELLIED WOODPECKERS FAIL AGAIN

BY GEORGE M. SUTTON

The Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) inhabits virtually all wooded parts of Oklahoma. Even in the Black Mesa country, within a few miles of the New Mexico state line, it has nested successfully at least once (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 305). The Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), a hardy and aggressive species that often nests in woodpecker holes, also breeds statewide. According to my observations since the summer of 1951, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is among Oklahoma birds that may be in danger of local extirpation as a direct result of the Starling's unremitting piracy.

In the spring and summer of 1980, in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I witnessed the failure of a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers to rear a brood. Their first nest-hole, started in late April, was about 15 feet up in one of four old, partly dead maple trees growing not far apart just across the street from my house in a residential part of the city. While the pair were at work, Starlings bothered them constantly, sometimes forcing them to leave the tree. The woodpeckers stopped digging when the hole was about half finished. I am not sure



RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER AND STARLING

*Starling has usurped the scolding male Red-belly's partially excavated nest-hole. Photo taken in Guthrie, Logan County, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford on 14 April 1983.*

that the Starlings were the sole cause of desertion. On 1 May I saw a Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) fly from a low part of the nest-tree. By that date, the Red-bellies might already have deserted. Never did I observe a Starling actually entering or coming out of the hole on 1 May or thereafter.

The woodpeckers' second hole, about 25 feet up in another of the old maples, they dug during the first half of May. Both male and female worked at it. The male often called *creer* when he was not at work. So far as I know, the female never gave that call. The pair were so busy with their excavating that I wondered when they were finding anything to eat. Again two or three Starlings hung around as if waiting for the hole to be finished. By this time at least three pairs of Starlings were nesting in the maples — two pairs in fairly large natural cavities, one pair in an old woodpecker hole.

The Red-bellies deserted this second nest-hole shortly after mid-May. I am not sure that it was finished when the Starlings took it and I am not sure that the Starlings raised young in it. I did not spend much time watching the birds, so cannot say how much fighting went on. Under one of those very maples, on 23 April 1959, I had rescued a flicker by driving its Starling assailant off. The flicker was on the ground "on its back with wings spread wide — and a Starling was on top of it. The Starling was pecking savagely and would, I believe, have killed the flicker had I not intervened" (Sutton, *op. cit.*, p. 467).

After the Red-bellies lost their second nest-hole, I expected them to leave the neighborhood, but every day I continued to hear the *creer* callnote, so I knew that at least one of the pair was frequenting the old maples. Occasionally I had a good look at the male as he perched on a telephone pole at the northeast corner of my yard or flew to a dead tree about a hundred yards away. So infrequently did I see the female that I thought she had left the area or been killed.

On 12 June I watched the male for some time, hoping to see his mate. I saw no female bird that day, but during the following week I so often heard the *creer* call that I felt sure the pair had settled themselves for the season. Finally I found the third nest-hole, which was in another of the old maples about 20 feet up. Once I had located it, I learned that the woodpeckers never left it for long. From the thick scattering of fresh chips on the ground I surmised that the hole had been completed, but I did not know whether eggs had been laid. The several Starlings of the immediate vicinity were so busy carrying food to young that they seemed to be paying no attention to the woodpeckers. Not once while I watched the nest-hole for 15-minute periods that day and the next did I see a Starling looking into the hole or trying to enter it. Nor did I see either woodpecker chasing a Starling off.

By mid-June the four maples were fairly alive with Starlings. At least five pairs of adults were busy carrying food, some of which they gave to young out of nests. The two woodpeckers were there too, but they were decidedly inconspicuous. They stayed at or close to the nest-hole much of the time.

From 15 to 18 June, whenever I made a point of watching the woodpeckers' nest-hole, the pair almost never left it. The male called *creer* occasionally. Never did I hear him or his mate give the barking note *chiv*. I saw much more of the male than of the female. I did not know what was in the nest, but noted that

when the birds looked in or entered they seemed to have no food in their bills. On the whole the weather was so warm during the middle of the day that the eggs may not have needed constant brooding.

On 17 June, Stephen Sisney of *The Norman Transcript* took color photographs of the two woodpeckers. That day each bird stuck its head into the nest-hole repeatedly, as if checking the cavity's contents. Each also went in, disappearing momentarily, then sticking its head out and looking around. The male seemed to be much more excitable and apprehensive than the female. I felt sure that neither bird was taking food to the nest. I surmised that eggs had been laid and were being incubated.

At 0700 on 21 June neither woodpecker was in sight anywhere, but within about 6 feet of the nest's entrance were five adult Starlings, all of them apparently idling. Their presence surprised me, for I had supposed that all adult Starlings of the neighborhood were busy feeding young. Even as I wondered whether the woodpeckers had deserted their nest, the male Red-belly flew in, alighting a foot or so below the nest-hole. The Starlings scattered. As the male woodpecker hitched upward, his mate stuck her head out. The male flew to a branch a few feet away and called *creer*. The call sounded peaceful rather than combative. Not while I watched from 0710 to 0730 did any of the Starlings return.

When I visited the nest-tree at 1625 on 22 June, neither woodpecker was in sight. Even as I stood there watching, a Starling popped out of the nest-hole and flew off. I found on the ground the shell of one end of a white, not very glossy Red-bellied Woodpecker's egg. The piece was dry and without a trace of membrane. Nowhere could I find the other end.

During my brief watch on the morning of 23 June I did not hear or see either of the woodpeckers. On the evening of 24 June the male bird was in the nest-tree and this time he was quite noisy: he called *chiv* or *chiv-chiv* several times. Only once did he call *creer*. When the female appeared, she also called *chiv* several times. Starlings were much in evidence throughout leafy parts of the old maples, but the woodpeckers made no attempt to drive them off. Never, during the rest of the summer, did I see the female woodpecker again.

On the morning of 27 June I again saw a Starling pop out of the woodpeckers' nest-hole. I waited for some time under the nest-tree but saw neither a Starling nor a woodpecker go into the hole. On 30 June I heard the male woodpecker call *creer* once. On 3 and 4 July I saw the male woodpecker in the nest-tree. Late in the evening on 8 July I heard the *creer* call and a bit later saw the male bird on a stub not far from the nest-hole. Early in the morning on 9 July I heard the *creer* call two or three times and also a brief, not very loud drum. On 27, 28, and 29 July I heard the *creer* call several times but did not see the bird that was giving it.

So far as I know, the Starlings did not raise a brood in the woodpeckers' third nest-hole. But they surely took it, perhaps as a place in which to roost. I feel sure that the woodpeckers did not raise a brood anywhere.