



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

Stupid Bird Tricks

David Letterman would be proud of this little bird's trick! No, it is not playing dead. "It's not dead, it's just restin'." Thanks to Solon Rhode of Shaftsbury, Vt., for this picture of a dangling ruby-throated hummingbird.

The photo generated quite a lot of interest and discussion this month in the VT BIRD listserv. Although the gender and age have not been verified, another bird supposedly fed it when it opened its beak while in this position. Another opinion offered to me was that this adult (note the gorgette - throat patch) was displaying to other adults who wanted to feed.



These birds engage in the most amusing antics of any feeder bird I know. Their flight patterns and sound effects are anything but stupid to them. Their communications appear quite complex and daredevilish. While you are watching, remember to change their food once/week or more during the hot weather. Hummingbirds are not the only birds who amuse us with their curious behavior. A flock of turkeys has just arrived in my unvegetated, dusty field this week. What a treat to watch three adults and 15 scampering, little young poults. This time of year, two or more families may band together with possibly one or more additional hens that have no broods. The open soil must have attracted this extended family.



It might seem stupid to take a bath in dirt, but turkeys control parasites this way and show the young how it's done. They like nice dry dirt that is about 3 inches deep. They will seek out these preferred spots by mid morning after early feeding, and sometimes later in the day as well. (Photo by Dave Reisende). And some birds actually eat dirt! Those birds with crops and gizzards like the turkey need gravel to help grind up their food. Plenty of that in my unvegetated area, too.

If you are wondering about turkey habitat, in addition to the dirt they need a source of water all year long, like open ponds, seeps and brooks. As ground feeders, their summer diet comes from the greens, seeds, berries

and insects and very small animals (spiders, ticks, centipedes, crayfish, snails and salamanders) they scratch up while covering miles in a day's foraging. Fall foods are mostly mast (acorns, nuts and tree seeds).

Jumping straight up in the air looks pretty silly, but turkeys will do this when startled or catching insects. These birds really do look foolish flapping like mad to get their large round bodies up into a tree to roost for the night. Tree roosts protect the flocks from predators from about 7:30 or 8 p.m. to dawn, so watch a flock somewhere to see how they seem to defy gravity when they lift off and crash into the branches.

While wild turkeys may not be on the top of some birdwatcher's lists, their growing populations in Vermont and New Hampshire increase the chance of seeing this native North American bird and their interesting antics.

Next month, I will look at the important issue of the decline of common birds and what people can do to help. Happy summer birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non-profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit www.nekaudubon.org. Art work by Robin Rothman.