

Why Do Birds Do That?

There is an article in a recent Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine by Cliff Shackelford entitled “Bird Brained Behaviors” in which the author describes a number of strange bird behaviors and explains why they do what they do. It seemed to me to be a good subject for a column so, while giving Mr. Shackelford credit for the idea and many of the following examples, here are some interesting bird antics.

If birds are to reproduce, they have to find mates. For the vast majority of all species, it is the female who does the choosing and thus the males who have to compete with other males for a female’s attention. For many species the male is more brightly colored and/or strikingly marked than the females, and every male in the area will do his best to out-shine the others in front of the female.

Hummingbirds don’t just settle for showy plumage; the male increases the likelihood that a female will see him by doing an aerial “dance” and flying in exaggerated U-shaped patterns up and down in front of the female, not only showing off his brightly colored feathers but his athletic abilities as well.

Why do some birds, especially shore birds and wading birds, frequently stand on one leg? It may be that it is the birdie equivalent of just shifting your weight from one foot to another when standing a long time. Or, if it is cold weather, bringing one foot up to nestle into their belly feathers keeps it warm.

When I was a kid up in the high plains we had a lot of killdeer around. I could always recognize them by both their call, their two black rings around their necks, and by the way they would hobble around with one wing dragging as if they were injured. But if you managed to get too close, they would just fly off. These are ground-nesters, and the nests, with or without eggs, are very inconspicuous. I grew up with the story that they did that to draw the cattle away to prevent the cattle from stepping on the nest. But I suspect that cattle have nothing to do with it. It is predators they are trying to draw away, and it probably works sometimes.

Ever see a bird taking a bath, but there wasn’t any water around at all? And usually it is in a place with bare, loose dirt. It is called a dust bath. There is some thought that parasites or dry skin causes it to itch and by fluffing up their feathers and flapping around sand gets between the feathers and dislodges whatever makes them itch. By the way, this behavior is not limited to birds—I have seen squirrels and rabbits do it as well.

Why do birds sometimes sit with their wings held out? It seems to be either to just get warm and/or to dry off. Obviously cormorants are drying their wings after hunting underwater—they can hardly fly with wet wings. When you see vultures doing it in early morning it is likely to be either just to warm themselves from the night and/or to dry off if it has been foggy or drizzly. Spreading their wings and fluffing their feathers makes for a larger surface area to absorb heat from the sun.

Some wrens, including Carolina wrens, build two or three nests, but only lay eggs, and incubate and raise young in one of them. The theory is that they do this to fool predators into thinking the “fake” nests are the real ones only to be disappointed and go away. I wonder if the wrens did this before there were so many people in their habitat with so many cats?

Barn swallows have been building a nest in the same place under our back porch for several years. It is fun to watch the frequent comings and goings as they fly off to find a bug and come back with a bug in their mouth to feed the young which are eagerly waiting on the edge of the nest. But sometimes, when they fly off they are carrying a white bag which they carry off some distance and then drop it. It is a fecal sac which Mother Nature has provided to contain the fecal matter when the young birds poop. Which is a very good thing given that there may be 4 or 5 young in a nest only 3 inches in diameter.

Until next time...

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