


Red-breasted Sapsuckers Nest in Utility Pole

Steven R. Helm

ABSTRACT.—A pair of Red-breasted Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) was observed nesting in an electric distribution, creosote-treated, wood utility pole in the Willamette Valley, Oregon during spring 2006. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first published account of a sapsucker nesting in a utility pole. Received 5 July 2006. Accepted 4 August 2006.

A pair of Red-breasted Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) was observed nesting in an electric distribution, creosote-treated, wood utility pole from 29 May through 4 June 2006 in the Willamette Valley, Clackamas County, Oregon (T2S, RIE, S28). The approximately 12-m tall pole was installed in 1969 and was heavily damaged. The nest hole was at a height of 3.0 m, while four similar sized nest holes and numerous non-nest excavations were evident higher on the pole. On 8 June 2006, an adult was found dead on the pole. The bird’s leg had become tangled in fine, black, plastic netting material that was present in the nest cavity. Apparently, the bird could not free itself as it flew from the pole. It is unknown whether the netting was used by the pair as a nest liner or placed by someone to cause nest failure. Nestlings were heard at the time the adult was removed but perished, as the nest was abandoned by the other adult. Red-breasted Sapsuckers had nested in this pole for several consecutive years according to local residents.

The pole was along a lightly traveled road in a semi-rural area and the nest hole faced east, toward the road. Habitat in the vicinity of the pole was characterized by a vineyard and farm with Christmas trees and scattered orchard trees to the west and mature riparian mixed forest, along the Tualatin River, to the east. Branches of an approximately 25-m tall Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) contacted the west side of the pole.

Red-breasted Sapsuckers, although known to drum on utility poles (Bent 1939), typically excavate nest cavities in large snags or live trees with decayed interiors (Howell 1952, Joy 2000, Walters et al. 2002). Nests in western Oregon are associated with dense midstory and understory cover in close proximity to water (Nelson 1988). New nest cavities are excavated each year, often in the same tree used in previous years (Howell 1952), and eggs are deposited on fine wood chips that are retained in the cavity (Bent 1939). Other species of woodpeckers are known to nest in utility poles causing significant damage (Dennis 1964, Harness and Walters 2004). Lower nest success occurs in recently installed, treated poles compared to more weathered, older (15 to 20 years), treated poles (Rumsey 1970).

None of the four currently recognized species of sapsuckers (AOU 1998) has previously been reported, to the author’s knowledge, to nest in utility poles. This account departs from published literature on nesting habitat of sapsuckers in general, and suggests that Red-breasted Sapsuckers are more opportunistic than previously thought. Photographic documentation of the nesting pair was submitted with the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED


1 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, P. O. Box 2946 (CENWP-PM-E), Portland, OR 97208, USA; e-mail: steve.r.helm@usace.army.mil
The First Specimen Record of Gray Heron (Ardea cinerea) for North America

Martin Renner1,3,4 and Paul D. Linegar2

ABSTRACT.—A Gray Heron (Ardea cinerea) was found alive on 11 October 1996 in Newfoundland, Canada. It was identified as a Great Blue Heron (A. herodias), and prepared as a study skin for a university teaching collection. We give a description of this first specimen for North America and summarize previous records from the western hemisphere. Received 31 October 2005. Accepted 1 March 2006.

The first Gray Heron (Ardea cinerea) specimen for North America was discovered by MR while selecting bird specimens from a teaching collection for an ornithology class at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) in September 2002. It had been lying, misidentified, in the MUN collection for years. The bird has been found moribund on 11 October 1996 at Lear’s Cove (46° 50' N, 054° 11' W), Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland, about 3 km north of Cape St. Mary’s and taken to Salmonier Nature Park where it died.

1 Biology Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, NL A1B 3X9, Canada.
2 21 Osbourne St., St. John’s, NL A1B 3X6, Canada.
3 Current address: School of Aquatic and Fishery Science, University of Washington, Box 355020, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.
4 Corresponding author; e-mail: auklet@bigfoot.com

This bird was presumed to be a Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias), was frozen and sent to the Biology Department at MUN to be used in teaching specimen preparation. The skin was prepared by a student, deposited in the collection, and labeled as a Great Blue Heron. It is now deposited in the Royal Ontario Museum as catalog number ROM 104256; male, culmen: 120 mm, flattened wing: 455 mm, tarsus: 152 mm (measurements by MR).

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The heron was gray above and white on the belly. The sides of the neck were uniform gray, and the crown was gray with a small blackish gray crest. The combination of a gray neck and white belly, and size rules out most of the world’s herons other than Gray and Great Blue herons.

Plumage.—The specimen lacks any rusty brown on the leg feathers or on the underwing or neck in contrast to a Great Blue Heron. There is a slightly buffy hue on the thighs. The front of the neck is white with bold black spots of high contrast. Thinner, longer, less well-defined black streaks continue from the neck to the belly. The neck on the Gray Heron is plain gray laterally without such markings...

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