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Parasitism of a Laughing Gull Nest by Black-bellied Whistling Ducks

Bart M. Ballard¹

ABSTRACT.—On 15 May 2000, I observed a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) nest parasitized by a Black-bellied Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*). The nest contained three Laughing Gull eggs and three Black-bellied Whistling-duck eggs and was located in a colony of 56 Laughing Gull nests. Received 16 Jan. 2001, accepted 21 Oct. 2001.

On 15 May 2000, while conducting an annual colonial waterbird count in the upper Laguna Madre of Texas (27° 35' N, 97° 17' W) I observed a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) nest containing three Laughing Gull eggs and three Black-bellied Whistling-duck eggs (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*). The nest was on the periphery of a gull colony comprising 56 Laughing Gull nests and was more concealed in gulf cordgrass (*Spartina spartinae*) than most of the gull nests closer to the shore of the spoil island (made from deposition of dredge spoil from the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway). I observed four occurrences of single or pairs of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks flushing from similar vegetation and associated with Laughing Gull colonies on other spoil islands that morning; these other islands were not investigated. A total of 31 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks were flushed from the 37 spoil islands surveyed during the waterbird counts in the upper Laguna Madre (A. H. Chaney unpubl. data).

The timing of the colonial waterbird counts in the upper Laguna Madre coincides with peak nesting activity of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks (Bellrose 1980). Past colonial waterbird counts (1992–2000) from these same 37 spoil islands included a mean of 55 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks per year (A. H. Chaney unpubl. data). During this time eight Black-bellied Whistling-duck nests and two recently hatched downy ducklings were ob-

served, but neither duckling was accompanied by an adult. Because of the large numbers of Laughing Gulls nesting on these islands (\bar{x} = 403, SE = 18.7 pairs per island, A. H. Chaney unpubl. data), survival of ducklings is doubtful, as gulls are known predators of ducklings (Vermeer 1968, Dwernychuk and Boag 1972).

Intraspecific brood parasitism by Black-bellied Whistling-ducks is common with rates from 56–97% (Delnicki 1973, McCamant and Bolen 1979, Chronister 1985, James 2000). Although intraspecific brood parasitism is well documented, information on interspecific brood parasitism by Black-bellied Whistling-ducks is limited to encounters with Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*; Bolen and Cain 1968) and Muscovy Ducks (*Cairina moschata*; Markum and Baldassarre 1989), both of which are cavity nesters. This appears to be the first published record of interspecific brood parasitism by Black-bellied Whistling-ducks on a species other than Wood Ducks or Muscovy Ducks, or of brood parasitism of ground nests.

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Swallow-tailed Kites Carry Passerine Nests Containing Nestlings to Their Own Nests

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ABSTRACT.—During 1995–2001, I documented 20 instances of Swallow-tailed Kites (*Elanoides forficatus*) carrying nests containing nestlings of six passerine species to their nests or roosts adjacent to kite nests in the Pearl River Basin (Mississippi and Louisiana) and Atchafalaya River Basin (Louisiana). This parental behavior is adaptive because it reduces time away from the nest, which reduces the amount of time that nestlings are left unguarded against avian predators. Nest carrying also reduces the amount of energy expended to transport prey to offspring, and may diminish loss of prey to kleptoparasitism. *Received 20 Nov. 2000, accepted 18 Oct. 2001.*

The Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) commonly feeds nestling and fledgling birds to its young. Birds accounted for up to 16% of the identified prey delivered to 13 nests in Florida and 18% to 9 nests in Guatemala (Sutton 1955, Snyder 1974, Meyer and Collopy 1990, Gerhardt et al. 1991, Meyer 1995). Only two species of raptors, the Swallow-tailed Kite and the Indian Black Eagle (*Ictinaetus malayensis*), have been reported to carry nests containing nestling prey (Brown and Amadon 1968, Skutch 1965). In Costa Rica, Skutch (1965) observed the southern subspecies of Swallow-tailed Kite (*E. f. yetapa*) carrying bird nests with nestlings and eating the nestlings while in flight after dropping the nest. Robertson (1988) reported nest carrying by kites in Guatemala. Herein is the first report of the northern subspecies of Swallow-

tailed Kite (*E. f. forficatus*) carrying bird nests containing nestlings, and the first report anywhere of carrying passerine nests with young to feed their nestlings.

I monitored Swallow-tailed Kite nesting activity in the Pearl River Basin Mississippi and Louisiana, during 1995–2001, and in the Atchafalaya River Basin, Louisiana, during 1999–2001. I collected prey remains from nests, from directly under nests, and beneath roosts at active nests. I found 20 nests of five passerine species; none of the species previously had been reported as prey (Table 1). Eighteen nests were in or under 13 kite nests and one at a roost beside an additional nest. Thus, at least 14 different kites exhibited this behavior at eight nesting colonies of two populations. I verified that kites ate the nestling passerines as evident from partially eaten remains or remains in pellets in or under the nest or roost.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) nests were most common, accounting for 65% of the total. Because kites forage mostly from above the canopy, and because Northern Parulas (*Parula americana*) and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers build their nests higher than other species considered here, 1.8–30.5 m and 1.2–21.3 m, respectively (Harrison 1975), it is not surprising that nests of these two species were encountered most frequently. Hooded Warblers (*Wilsonia citrina*) build the lowest nests, ranging in height from 0.3–1.8 m, and sometimes nest in thickets (Harrison 1975). Skutch (1965) watched a kite (*E. f. yetapa*) make a low swoop to collect a Golden-hooded

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