



The Katharine Ordway
Natural History Study Area

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ORDWAY BULLETIN
No. 107

MACALESTER
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

A MORBID REVERIE at ORDWAY.

It was mid-April and I was returning from a stroll in the woods when I decided to walk along a fenceline where I had placed a few nesting-boxes on widely-separated posts. I had seen an English Sparrow perched atop one box a couple of days before and decided to remove any nesting-material that night have been placed therein, thus to discourage the sparrows and to encourage the Bluebirds or Tree Swallows, which I had seen flying nearby.

When I removed the box-lid I found the carcass of a Tree Swallow inside. Its head had been virtually separated from its body - by pecking, I believe. I reasoned that one of the contesting sparrows had been able to bully the swallow within and by reaching through the opening was able to inflict stunning-mortal blows on the victim. The rest of the mutilation was probably caused by the victor's feeding upon the dead flesh.

It was a female bird - I had encountered her before. Looking at the dead body I read the leg-band number, 890-30327, the same which she had worn for almost eleven months. During the preceding year (on May 26, 1980) I had lifted her from the same nesting-box where she had completed her nest. She had not yet deposited any eggs in the nest but her swollen abdomen showed a fully-developed egg which was within a few minutes of being laid. I banded her and replaced her on the nest, which later (June 15) produced a brood of seven young. Now I dropped her body to the ground and walked away.

It rather sobered the remainder of my return walk, causing me to think of such things as the flowing beauty in flight of the Tree Swallow, now stilled and beginning to rot; the sheer violence of the act (could I think of it as "cannibalism" - or doesn't that involve ingesting the same species?); the prospect of an unused nesting-spot (for I had already resolved to deny it to the indigenous sparrows); the fury with which wild creatures contest for their "rights" of territory and nesting-sites; the futility of the long migratory return to nest and to be cut down just at its moment of fulfilment. I wish it hadn't happened but.....

R J CHRISTMAN,
Naturalist

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