

Golden-fronted Woodpecker Provisions Nestlings with Small Mammal Prey

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ABSTRACT.—On 11 April 2002, in San Pedro, Belize, we observed a male Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes aurifrons dubius*) cache a mouse carcass and subsequently provision nestlings with tissue taken from it. During 12 min of observation, the male made seven trips with pieces of the carcass, taking pieces of muscle to the nestlings and consuming skin and connective tissue himself. This is the first published record of the consumption of mammalian prey by this species. Received 14 June 2002, accepted 7 December 2002.

The natural history of the Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes aurifrons*) is poorly known, particularly for many of the subtropical and tropical races of this species. Data on the range of food items delivered to nestlings are especially limited. Here, we report an observation of a male Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*M. a. dubius*) in Belize provisioning nestlings with tissue pecked from the carcass of a small mammal.

We first observed the male at 07:30 CST on 11 April 2002 on the grounds of the Caribbean Villas Hotel in San Pedro, Ambergris Caye (17° 54' N, 87° 58' E), Belize. As we watched from a distance of approximately 10 m, the male flew with a carcass in its bill to an abandoned wooden utility pole. The male perched approximately 10 m above the ground on the bottom edge of a shallow, irregular crevice in the pole and proceeded to wedge the carcass into the depression. At this time, we determined that the carcass was a small mammal, probably a mouse. The pelage was almost entirely dark gray, and we saw a thin, furry tail approximately equal in length to that of the body (about 7–10 cm total length). The carcass was mostly intact, but the skin appeared to have been torn in a few places.

Using the jagged edges of the crevice to anchor the carcass, the male pecked it repeat-

edly with slow and deliberate strokes, stopping briefly to pull off and consume bits of skin and hair. The male then removed three or four pieces of what appeared to be muscle tissue from the carcass and flew approximately 50 m to a nest cavity in a coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) snag. When the male arrived at the nest, we could hear nestlings begging inside. After a few seconds, the male almost completely entered the nest, withdrew with its bill empty, and returned immediately to the carcass cached in the utility pole. As before, the male pecked at the carcass repeatedly, tearing from it bits of skin and translucent connective tissue that he consumed. On one occasion, the male picked up the entire carcass and wedged it back into the crevice. The male then removed three or four more pieces of dense pink tissue and flew to the nest cavity. After feeding the nestlings, the male returned to the mouse carcass to collect more food. His efforts were interrupted when he called twice to his mate as she returned to the nest cavity with a bill full of food. The female responded while approaching the nest but did not call again as she flew away after feeding the nestlings. The male returned his attention to the carcass and pecked at it as before, this time ripping the tail from the carcass and consuming it before he flew back to the nest with three more pieces of muscle tissue.

The male continued to provision the nestlings in this fashion until 07:42 when he flew from the nest cavity without returning to the mouse carcass. Between 07:31 and 07:42 the male made a total of seven visits to the nest with tissue from the carcass. During his final visit to the carcass, he removed a large, yellow mass of viscera and dropped it to the ground. He then removed an approximately 5-mm piece of muscle tissue and delivered it to the nest cavity. We searched for the tissue that the male dropped but could not find it in the surrounding low vegetation.

Although data on the foraging ecology of this species are limited, Golden-fronted

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Woodpeckers are known to be omnivorous and opportunistic (Husak and Maxwell 1998), as are their closest relatives, the Red-bellied (*Melanerpes carolinus*; Shackelford et al. 2000) and Gila (*M. uropygialis*; Edwards and Schnell 2000) woodpeckers. Animal matter consumed by Golden-fronted Woodpeckers includes a variety of insects and spiders (Kujawa 1984, Husak and Maxwell 1998), and possibly bird eggs (Husak 1995). Husak and Maxwell (1998) reported that one individual was observed to have killed and possibly eaten a *Sceloporus* lizard, and in another study an individual was observed consuming marrow from a bone (Kujawa 1984). Almost no data are available, however, on the food items that adult Golden-fronted Woodpeckers deliver to their nestlings. In westcentral Texas, such items reportedly include insects, spiders, and berries (Husak and Maxwell 1998).

This apparently is the first published record of an adult Golden-fronted Woodpecker consuming and provisioning nestlings with mammalian prey. The consumption of mammalian prey (mice) has been observed in only one other species in the genus *Melanerpes*, the Red-headed Woodpecker (*M. erythrocephalus*), though very infrequently (Smith et al. 2000). Adult Red-headed Woodpeckers occasionally have been observed to consume other vertebrates as well, including dead fish (Southern 1966), small lizards (Belson and Small 1998), and nestling Cliff Swallows (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*; citations in Smith et al. 2000). The more closely related Gila Woodpecker also has been observed to consume small lizards (Phillips et al. 1964) and meat scraps (beef bones and bacon rind; Bailey 1923).

We do not know whether the male Golden-fronted Woodpecker described in this report killed the mouse that he cached and fed to his nestlings, but it is possible given that other species in this genus prey on live vertebrates. Alternatively, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers are opportunistic in their foraging habits and

the male we observed might have discovered the mouse after it had died. Our observation underscores the omnivorous foraging habit of this species and provides unique information on the range of food items delivered to nestlings.

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