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Reaction of Starlings to a Dark-Phase Red-Tailed Hawk

Barbara L. Wilson
Nebraska Ornithological Union

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Barbara L. Wilson, 1450 Gibson Hill Road, Albany, Oregon 97321

The role of polymorphism in bird plumage has been debated. One theory is that prey species become familiar with the common plumages of raptors and avoid them, but are unlikely to recognize unusual plumages as indicating dangerous birds (Clarke 1969). In other words, the rare plumage acts as a sort of disguise. This theory assumes that prey learn the appearance of their predators, but since prey that encounter hawks often end up dead, the opportunity for learning may be limited (Arnason 1978). An incident at Bellevue, Nebraska supports the hypothesis that an unusual color phase can act as a disguise.

As I parked at Offutt Air Force Base on April 1, 1989, I saw what I thought was a crow flying slowly toward the grassy edge of a runway and hanging there, stationary, facing into the wind. As it soared, closer examination revealed a nearly black Red-tailed Hawk. Its plumage was all very dark except that the undersides of the primaries were light toward the bases, and the tail was dark rust or brown as seen from below.

Birders are familiar with the typical reactions of starlings to a nearby hawk. They bunch closely together, and rise to circle above the hawk so that it would have difficulty catching an individual starling out of the tight cluster. The dark, threatening mass above the hawk seems to disturb it, for it usually flies away.

Interestingly, a small flock of starlings at the air base did not react to the dark Red-tailed Hawk in the normal way. They flew well separated, landed, walked a bit, flew a little further, settled, and soon took off again, but did not fly in a tight bunch, nor did they rise above the hawk. Apparently, they were reacting to what they took for a mildly disturbing crow, not to the hawk.

Though color phases may help Red-tailed Hawks to hide when hunting from perches that differ in darkness (Preston 1980), the hypothesis that unusual colors act as disguises cannot be dismissed completely.

Literature Cited

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