

Harrison Middle School
7th Grade Science; Mr. Cuthbert
Bryce A: Nature Note

Gray Catbirds and Their Feeding Habits

Dumetella carolinensis

Catbirds have a diet that varies with their migration. When they migrate to Maine, they eat mostly insects throughout the spring and summer months. After they migrate to the south like Florida or Mexico in the fall, their diet changes to mostly fruits and berries. (Craves, 2003; The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2019) However, these birds have been observed eating uncommon foods at bird feeders, such as donuts, cheese, boiled potato, and cornflakes. They are known to sometimes eat small fish. (National Audubon Society, 2020) My family lives in Yarmouth, Maine. Behind our house, we have a birdfeeder and there is also a gully filled with berries,

bushes, flowers, shrubs, trees.



In May 2020, we placed a new peanut feed on our birdfeeder. I then noticed a new type of bird coming to feed quite often. I was surprised because the Gray Catbird is not specifically listed on the feed.

On 5/21/2020 at 10:50, I observed the feeder for 2 hours. Five birds came and fed between 37 seconds and 1min 10 seconds, for an overall average of 51.8 seconds.



On 5/22/2020 at 10:45, I observed the Gray Catbirds eating the regular feed and after an hour no Gray Catbirds came. I observed again for an hour at 13:01 hours and there were no Gray Catbirds coming to the feed.

On 5/23/2020, I placed the peanut feed, back on the feeder at 15:00 hours, it took 11 minutes before the first catbird arrived to feed. Many followed devouring the feed.



These observations confirmed that the Gray Catbirds came for the feed specifically, not because they just arrived from the South. When I examined the composition of both feeds, I learned that the “Regular Feed” includes, black oil sunflower, white millet, milo, gelatin, safflower, sunflower kernels, peanuts, and striped sunflower. On the other hand, the “Peanut Feed” has corn, roasted peanuts, rendered beef suet, oats, wheat, fish, and soy.

The fact that none of the ingredients listed in the peanut feed are part of the Gray Catbirds' regular diet stood out the most. This led me to further analyze the similarities between the ingredients and texture of the peanut feed compared to their regular diet.

Looking closer at the ground nuts and corn mixed in with the beef fat is likely very similar in texture to insects which they mostly eat in the spring and summer months. The corn is sweet and may have a taste similar to fruits that are also a major part of their diet. The beef fat may smell and taste similar to insects. Based on this analysis, it seems that the peanut feed mimics the characteristics of their natural diet. In conclusion, even though there are no actual ingredients related to their natural diet, could the mimicry of the texture, smell, and taste of the peanut feed be enough to create this strong attraction? And if so, what implications could this observation have on future feed resources for birds? Could this observation be used to help us either attract, locate, or alternatively feed endangered birds?

References

Craves, Julie. "The cat's meow: the endearing Gray Catbird can be bold, inquisitive, and musical one moment, secretive and silent the next." *Birder's World*, vol. 17, no. 5, Oct. 2003, p. 30. Gale In Context: High School, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A115517385/GPS?u=mlti_harrisonms&sid=GPS&xid=c33cc503. Accessed 28 May 2020.

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The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "All About Birds: Gray Catbird." The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell University, 2019, www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Gray_Catbird/lifehistory. Accessed 29 May 2020.

