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USE OF AN UNUSUAL FOOD SOURCE BY ROCK WRENS (TROGLODYTIDAe)

Polly K. Phillips¹ and Allen F. Sanborn²

Key words: Rock Wrens, food source, foraging, Salpinctes obsoletus, Troglectidae, feeding behavior.

On 12 July 1993 we observed an interesting exchange between an adult Rock Wren (Salpinctes obsoletus) and two juveniles. While at Toroweap Point on the north rim of the Grand Canyon we observed an adult wren accompanied by two juveniles near our vehicle. All three birds walked beneath the vehicle by the rear wheel, but the adult moved immediately to the front end whereupon it hopped onto the front bumper and began to inspect the grill. The adult found and ate an insect that had been trapped in the grillwork. While standing on the bumper, the adult began to vocalize after consuming the insect. The juveniles appeared to show a positive phonotactic response to these calls, stopped foraging under the rear of the vehicle, and moved to the front. After the juveniles arrived at the front of the vehicle, the adult continued collecting insects from the grill. The adult ate none of these insects but merely held them in its beak while walking back and forth across the bumper. The adult continued to vocalize, periodically pausing to face the juveniles. Then it continued foraging in the grill. It appeared to us that the adult was showing the insects to the young. Neither of the young birds joined the adult on the bumper, however, and within a few minutes the adult and juveniles flew off, not to return that afternoon. As far as we have been able to determine, this sort of acquired or derived behavior has not been reported previously for Rock Wrens nor for any member of the family Troglodytidae.

Other observers have noticed birds taking advantage of unusual food sources, such as the opening of milk bottles (Fisher and Hinde 1949). There is generally a question, however, as to whether the behavior was by chance or learned.

One possible explanation for our observations is that the parent was tutoring the offspring about the availability of food in vehicle grillwork. Tutoring and observational learning have been documented in laboratory experiments in blackbirds (Mason et al. 1984), tits (Sherry and Galef 1984, 1990), and pigeons (Palameta and Lefebvre 1985), and have also been documented in the wild in other birds using usual food sources (Schaadt and Rymon 1982). We have no way of knowing whether the adult we observed was attempting to teach what we believe were its offspring about an unusual food source. We hope this observation will stimulate further study of feeding in fledgling birds with the possibility of discoveries in social learning.

LITERATURE CITED


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