

## What is Wrong With Those Crazy Birds?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Lengthening days, warmer weather, sunshine, what isn't to like about spring? All of those conditions impact us in many ways; some obvious, some not so obvious. They make it hard, at least for me, to concentrate when I'm inside, because I want to be outside. Those same conditions impact animals and few less noticeably than birds!

Springtime is nesting time. Some species are already nesting and busy incubating or raising their first brood. Many are just arriving or will be in the next few weeks. By the time we get to the first of June, some species will have already finished their breeding season, others will still be en route to more northern breeding areas while some will just then be settling into their nesting routine.

Many of these species are arriving here from the tropics where there was warm weather and plenty of food, so why do they not nest there, but come this far north, or further, to raise their young? We don't really know that for sure, but we do know that as days lengthen, hormone levels in birds start to change dramatically. These rapidly rising hormone levels cause many species to molt into their bright "breeding" plumage. Those rising levels also cause males to start to become more aggressive in defending territory and singing to attract a mate. Females will become "broody" as their bodies start to produce eggs. The females can also start to become very defensive of territory.

Size of the home territory for birds varies depending on the species but almost always comes down to food availability. House Wrens will defend about an acre (43,560 square feet) and drive out others trying to nest there. (I heard my first House Wren a week ago by the way!) Purple Martins will nest in large colonies right next to each other. The difference is based on food source. House Wrens carefully work their way through trees and vegetation collecting insects to feed themselves and their young. Purple Martins snag flying insects on the wing and cover a large area.

It is the defense of these territories that cause some bizarre interactions between birds and people. Cardinals, wrens and other species can be found attacking windows, car mirrors, barbecue grills, anything shiny object that they may see their reflection in. The bird is attacking your windows not because it wants to come in, but because it wants to drive the other bird that they are seeing out of their territory. Once they see their reflection, it becomes an obsessive quest to get that interloper out of their territory!

Sometimes these attacks may last a few days but in some cases, especially with cardinals, it can go on for weeks, or as long as the breeding season lasts. Sometimes the best approach is to ignore the bird, but sometimes this isn't possible. Putting things up inside the window doesn't usually help as they are seeing their reflection on the outside of the window. You have to cover the glass on the outside. I've seen newspaper taped over windows for a few weeks or until a rain and wind storm come along. You can also try taping up trash bags or netting. Often just the area of the window that is being attacked, often the lower half, is all that needs to be covered.

The good news is that they will quit eventually, probably by July if not sooner. It can also be a great time for young children to watch birds close up from inside the house. Regardless, rest assured that the bird hasn't gone mad, it's just defending it's territory!