

ATTEMPTED CAPTURE OF A RED-LEGGED FROG BY AN AMERICAN ROBIN

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The American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) is a ubiquitous songbird of urban, suburban, rural, and natural grassland, shrubland, and forested habitats. In British Columbia, it is widespread, occurring in mild, temperate, lowland areas year-round, and in other regions from early spring through to autumn (Campbell et al. 1997). There is very little information on the annual or seasonal foods of the American Robin in British Columbia, but prey species, both animal and plant, can be expected to vary with the underlying distribution and abundance of potential prey items. The purpose of this note is to document the attempted capture of an unusual prey item, the Red-legged Frog (*Rana aurora*) (Figure 1), on northern Vancouver Island.

On 2 July 2001, while conducting research in Tree Farm License 39 north of Campbell River, Joanna Preston and I stopped at the Forest Recreation Site at Flowils Lake (UTM 5559631 N, 315010 E, Zone 10) to check the area for nesting Common or Red-throated loons (*Gavia immer* and *G. stellata*). We also searched adjacent areas in the forest surrounding the recreation site for frogs, snakes, salamanders, and songbirds. On the north side of the lake, just west of the picnic area, a small stream gently flows into the lake, creating a boggy area dominated by skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanum*), rotting logs, and very moist soils. It was at this location, while trying to pinpoint a Pacific-slope Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*), that a sharp, high-pitch

squeak was heard coming from the ground, not far from our feet. We both immediately looked down, and to our surprise, observed an adult American Robin chasing a frantically hopping Red-legged Frog. The frog, measuring about 3.8 to 5.1 cm in length, was at best no more than 30 cm ahead of the robin at any given moment. In one instance, the robin actually pounced on the frog, which subsequently managed to escape and continue hopping. The first place offering protective cover was under the leaves of a skunk cabbage plant, but the robin's chase was so accelerated, that the frog was immediately flushed from that location. The frog then rapidly approached the stream and immediately dove in. The robin continued the chase, jumping almost in unison, into the 5-cm deep water, creating a substantial splash. The stream, no more than 75 cm wide, was easily traversed by the swimming frog. The robin, however, did not give up, and ran through the water, chasing the frog under a rotting log with a maze of decaying roots. The chase, having lasted no more than 10 seconds, ended here with the robin regaining some composure, and flying to a nearby tree branch. The frog was not seen again.

Opportunistic foraging by predatory and scavenger birds is not uncommon, often because of their flexibility in the types of prey they can consume (i.e., given the right prey size, most birds of prey can capture and consume a wide variety of prey types). However, many more species are more 'diet restricted', meaning that they are functionally limited to a specific type of prey, or prey size. The diet of the American Robin is quite variable if we



Figure 1. The Red-legged Frog is a widespread, forest-dwelling amphibian in coastal forests of British Columbia. 16 June 2003 (Michael I. Preston).

consider the many types of berries and invertebrates they consume, but overall, they are generally limited to prey that is easily captured, handled, and consumed. Often, their diet is comprised of differing proportions of fruit and protein, depending on energy requirements, food availability, and time of year. In North America, the most common animal foods consumed by the American Robin includes beetles, angleworms, weevils, caterpillars, earthworms, crickets, grasshoppers, butterflies, moths, locusts, spiders, snails, and many other kinds of insects (Bent 1949, Sallabanks and James 1999). Unusual prey items recorded for the American Robin include fish fry, snakes, shrews, and damselfly nymphs (see Sallabanks and James 1999 for detailed references).

After a thorough search of the Ornithological Worldwide Literature (OWL) and the Web of Science, using “*Rana aurora*”, “frog”, “prey”, “food”, “predation”, or “diet”, combined with “American Robin” or “*Turdus migratorius*”, I was unable to find any attempted, or successful, captures of any species of frog. Therefore, this appears to be the first documented occurrence for this type of behaviour by the American Robin toward a frog species. It also increases our range of knowledge on the opportunistic foraging habits of what might often be considered a “generalist feeder”.

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About the Author

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