



Observed American Mink Predation in a Yellow-headed Blackbird Colony in British Columbia

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American Mink (*Neovison vison*) is a widely distributed, semiaquatic mammal that preys on other smaller mammals as well as birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and large invertebrates (Hatler et al. 2008). Most attention on depredation by mink in North America has centred on the impact it has on waterfowl production and methods to manage the carnivorous predator (e.g., Eberhardt and Sargeant

1977, Talent et al. 1983, Sargeant and Arnold 1984). Direct evidence of predation by mink on other marsh-nesting birds, especially passerines, is often anecdotal or assumed and has rarely been witnessed (see Sealy 1994, Picman and Isabelle 1995, Sawin et al. 2003).

On 29 June 2011, at about 1550 hr, while surveying wetlands for nesting birds at Watson Lake, British Columbia, I watched an American Mink eat



Figure 1. Remains of a recently fledged Yellow-headed Blackbird eaten by an American Mink. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, Watson Lake, BC, 29 June 2011. BC Photo 3751a (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).*



Figure 2. The amount of droppings on the side or rim of a Yellow-headed Blackbird nest suggests that eggs hatched successfully and nestlings may have fledged. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, Watson Lake, BC, 29 June 2011.*

a fledged Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) on an empty American Coot (*Fulica americana*) nest. The mink, partially obscured by bulrushes (*Scirpus* spp.), was observed for several minutes through binoculars from about eight metres. It was finishing its meal, eating the lower body of the blackbird with the legs still attached. The mink swam off, seemingly undisturbed, and disappeared into the bulrushes. When I examined the feeding site, the bare legs and a bit of the body of the blackbird remained along with a few scattered feathers still in sheath. The fledgling blackbird was estimated to be about 10-11 days old (see Twedt and Crawford 1995; Figure 1). Newly fledged blackbirds are more vulnerable to predation because they leave the nest several days before they can fly and cling to surrounding vegetation, awaiting food from the parents where predators can be snatch the young (Campbell et al. 2001).



Figure 3. The remains of the digestive system, along with a few unsheathed feathers in this empty American Coot nest, suggest that American Mink may have eaten other fledged Yellow-headed Blackbirds. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, Watson Lake, BC, 29 June 2011. BC Photo 3751b.*

Yellow-headed Blackbird is an obligate, colonial, wetland-nesting passerine that prefers to breed in bulrush marshes in British Columbia (Campbell et al. 2001). In 2011, 57 nests were tallied at the Watson Lake colony. All nests were attached to the stems of bulrushes (Figure 2) in 0.6-0.9 m (24-36 in) of water and nests ranged from about 13-58 cm (5-23 in) above water. Thirty-one of the nests (54%) were empty and of these 18 were newly built without contents, suggesting a re-nesting or late nesting attempt. The remaining empty nests showed signs of use (e.g., droppings on rim or side of nest and occasionally in nest chamber; Figure 2). The remaining 26 nests held eggs, in various stages of incubation; one nest contained two nestlings about four days old. No other fledged young were found in the bulrushes near or away from nests.

Two other empty coot nests were found with remains of Yellow-headed Blackbird fledglings. These included scattered feathers still in sheath and the remains of the digestive system with scattered undeveloped feathers (Figure 3). No Yellow-headed Blackbird nests were tipped suggesting the mink did not attempt to feed on eggs or nestlings.

Weather for the 2011 nesting season was abnormal with cool temperatures, high rainfall, and water levels above normal (see Campbell et al. in prep). In normal years, Yellow-headed Blackbird begins egg-laying in late May and early June and most young have fledged by late June (Campbell et al. 2001). In 2011, Yellow-headed Blackbirds at the Watson Lake colony were attempting to re-nest and many had completed replacement clutches (see Twedt and Crawford 1995).

The two greatest sources of mortality to nesting Yellow-headed Blackbirds is predation and nestling starvation (Young 1963, Willson 1966, Richter 1984, Picman and Isabelle 1995). It is possible that predation by American Mink of fledged Yellow-headed Blackbirds at Watson Lake impacted the success of the initial nesting attempt as no fledged or flying young were encountered during the survey.

Although predation of Red-winged Blackbird (*Aeglais phoeniceus*) nests by American Mink has been witnessed (Knight et al. 1985), predation in Yellow-headed Blackbird colonies by mink remains conjecture. The direct observation of American Mink predation in the Yellow-headed Blackbird colony at Watson Lake is the first observed since I started monitoring the site in the late 1970s. †

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