

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

What is that bird doing at my window?



Spring is a rough time for birds. It's like going through puberty all over again every year. Unfortunately, most birds don't remember from one year to the next what the experience is like. And hormones can make them do what appears to us some pretty unusual things. Take a bird, usually a cardinal, mockingbird or towhee, which constantly throws himself (and it is usually a male) at your patio window. To us it seems pretty fruitless and dangerous since it appears the bird may actually hurt himself. To the bird however, it is very logical and necessary.



The rise in hormones triggers an instinct in the bird to protect his territory from any interlopers. This will assure his reproductive success. Your patio window falls within the territory the bird has claimed for whatever reason as his own. One day as he flies past the patio window while patrolling his territory he notices his reflection. Only he doesn't know it's a reflection. To him it looks like another male trying to move in on his territory. Instantly he swerves to meet the interloper and the interloper does the same. They meet head to head and toe to toe and the fight begins. Of course the other bird doesn't back down and the confrontation can go on for hours.

Since most birds have no sense of smell, visual clues are the main way they identify each other. So as

long as the reflection is there, the bird is going to think it's another bird challenging him.

I didn't say birds were very smart and we all know hormones can make us do some pretty funny things. I have observed and heard about this behavior on numerous occasions. At the credit union near where I work they have one of those windows which is completely reflective. And there is a mockingbird who every year does battle with himself for several weeks. I have also seen a cardinal battle with car mirrors which inadvertently get parked within its territory.

What can you do to help prevent these endless confrontations? Simply remove the reflection by putting a screen in front of the window or provide light from inside. For car mirrors put a sock or something over the mirror so the bird can't see it. This will save your car from getting damaged from bird droppings which often accompany these battles. Be assured though, once the hormones begin to subside the behavior will disappear as well. So will the drumming on your gutters! But that is another story.



Additional Information:

Keeping Birds Safe Around Windows, Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/netcommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1184>