Biologists Find Sibling Rivalry in Northern Mockingbird Broods
BIOLOGISTS FIND SIBLING RIVALRY IN NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD BROODS

DAYTON, Ohio -- Being an only child seems to be an advantage for the northern mockingbird.

Biologists studying the fledgling behavior of the mockingbirds found a strong case for the existence of sibling rivalry in birds: the bigger the brood size, the more likely that developmental behaviors are slowed in some birds in the brood.

In a study published in the most recent Florida Field Naturalist, Randall Breitwisch of the University of Dayton and Natasha Gottlieb of the University of Miami reported significant differences in young mockingbirds according to brood size. In comparing brood sizes of one to three, mockingbirds who had the nests all to themselves developed behaviors such as "chat calls" and "wing flashing" as early as a week before other fledgling mockingbirds.

Chat calls are short, staccato cries that may serve in territorial protection. Wing-flashing, in which the predominantly gray and black birds spread their wings in a distinctive three-part motion, flashing a streak of white, may be territorial or help the birds forage for insects.

"The parents are working very hard to feed them all day long -- it only takes a few

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observations to see you’ve got these potentially competing young. The interaction between parent and child and among siblings is very interesting," he said.

Breitwisch and Gottlieb studied the birds -- most prominent in the South and on the Gulf Coast -- on the campus of the University of Miami, where the clipped lawns and vegetation offered a lush habitat for the species. Breitwisch noted that few studies have been conducted on fledgling behavior in general because young birds remain hidden in vegetation until they’re big enough to fend for themselves. "They’re young, they’re vulnerable and they tend to stay very quiet and still," he said.

This study focused on 11 birds in six different broods. Only a long-term study can determine whether the delayed development affects the survival of the birds, he noted.

Another interesting finding may seem familiar to parents who watch with dismay as adult children move back into their old room for an indeterminate stay. The father mockingbird, who has been working hard to feed the young birds since they hatched, abruptly and aggressively chases the young birds off when a new brood hatches. But Breitwisch noted if the young birds stick around, the father ignores them after a day or two. But no more free meals, Breitwisch noted.

"The fledglings seem to give up on getting fed, but they do like to stay close to home," he said.

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For interviews, contact Randall Breitwisch at (513) 229-2504.