



# Territory & Personal Space



Rich Stallcup

A SUDDEN "Zeeee," high in the air above, signaled the presence of the first spring Allen's Hummingbird to return from Mexico. It was January 26th, the average arrival date for this species at Point Reyes. Upon hearing the bird, I glanced up and saw the little fellow power-diving straight towards me. By the time I could look back down he was drinking from the freshly filled hummingbird feeder, hanging, incidentally, from my hand. I froze. He drank, then went straight to the business of chasing the numerous Anna's Hummingbirds that had been here all winter. Having travelled over 1300 miles, this bird was on territo-

White-headed Woodpecker.

ry within 30 seconds of touch-down. He had been here before.

It is the same with most of our migratory nesting birds. Having gone the distance from tropical winter haunts back to this place of birth, they "hit the ground" singing, scrapping, and otherwise defining their breeding territories. Males generally arrive a few days before females and set the area dimensions, so that once the pair forms, they can quickly begin courtship, nest preparation, and reproduction.

Usually, the only territorial worries for a male bird concern another male of his own species, or a suspected nest predator such as a jay, hawk, snake, or

weasel. (Cowbirds usually slip through unchallenged.) A Warbling Vireo, a Wilson's Warbler, a "Western" Flycatcher, a Black-headed Grosbeak, a Purple Finch, and a Wrenit may have overlapping territories, but never with another of their own kind. Song, plumage flares, and aggressive chase make up their main artillery bank against would-be intruders during turf wars. (They employ the same attributes in courtship and mate retention.) Fights involving harmful contact do occur in most species but are not common:

## Patches, Strips, and Winter Space

THE MOST USUAL TYPE of territory for our widespread songbirds is the "patch," an irregular geometric shape designed around favored song perches, the presence of water, and good habitat. Other territory types, such as those maintained by birds (like the Yellow Warbler) of riparian woodland, are linear — long and skinny. A pair of Dippers may dominate a nesting range over a mile long but only as wide as their tiny stream from bank to bank.

Territory can also be simply a matter of personal space. In tropical places it is usual to see individuals of five or six species of herons and egrets foraging on a

small pond in apparent harmony, but a second of any one species would be asking for a fight from its



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own kind. Colonial waterbirds like Brandt's Cormorants, Snowy Egrets, and Caspian Terns place many nests in a small area, but each has a clear boundary from the next, often just beyond pecking distance. Such spacing limits the size of the colony.

Many birds defend a personal space all year. Even in the winter, it seems that coots spend half their time on ponds motoring after other coots — heads down, tails up, threatening any that come too close with squawks and bright white tail lights. Likewise, Willets take territoriality with them to wintering areas, where they defend foraging spots against other Willets and like-sized waders. Some may allow a curlew, godwit, or Whimbrel into their area to feed . . . only to be mugged for bounty by the landlord!

Even tiny flocking birds like bushtits and sandpipers maintain a region of personal space, in flight and on the ground, to increase foraging efficiency and keep from bumping into each other. It's the same with big ones like cranes and vultures. Gregarious aerial insectivores such as swallows and swifts may divide the sky into temporary bits of personal air space.

## Territorial Notes

**F**OOD AVAILABILITY MAY DICTATE the size of a nesting territory and, in some species, the number of eggs produced. If insect food is abundant, Warbling Vireos can nest on territories smaller than when food is scarce — and more pairs can reproduce successfully. If the California meadow mouse (*Microtus*) has a population boom west of the Sierra, so will White-tailed Kites (yes, it is OK to call them White-taileds). When prey items are few, many large raptors, especially owls, may not even think about breeding; when prey are numerous, so are the raptors' fledged young.

♣ Male hummingbirds defend courtship territories centered around a food source. This source not only sustains the energy of the males but also attracts

females, which in turn are attracted to males showing off. Once fertilized, the females move on to build nests and raise young alone, and territory around these nests is of little importance; we have seen two active Allen's nests on the same branch.

♣ Hummingbirds in California have short vocalizations, some of which have long been thought to be made by their feathers (a notion now in question for certain species; see a future "Focus"). Anna's is the only one with an actual song, and that song is weak. (Conversely, many small, plain, and colorless birds, like Winter Wren, have *huge* voices.) To make up for this vocal deficit, plumage flares and aggressive chase are much enhanced in hummingbirds.

♣ Woodpeckers drum their territorial statements, using drumming trees that are usually dead and hollow, intensifying sound and making a small bird (like a Downy or White-headed woodpecker) sound *really* big. These trees are strongly defended and sometimes peg the corners of a territory.

♣ Mapping a territory is fun and a great way to learn about how things work in the bird world. Draw a simple map of a park, marsh, or patch of woods, and pick an individual of one bird species singing there. Find the bird, and mark its song perch on your map. Each time he moves, find him and mark the spot again (you get extra credit for noting the kind of tree it is in). If you see a chase, watch where he breaks it off, and mark that spot. If the nest site is known, mark that too: it will be near the center of whatever territory shape develops. After several early morning visits, your map should be heavy with pencil lead, and by connecting the outside dots, you will see the territory of your bird.

Willets.

