

The Toilet Paper Bandit

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There have been many interesting and spectacular wildlife sightings while one is perched upon the throne at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO). The unenclosed outhouse provides an excellent opportunity to fully appreciate the natural surroundings while you do your business. From a Western Tanager sighting to a pair of Long-eared owls nesting just a few meters away, wildlife viewing seems to be at its best when sitting on the throne. Maybe its because, being on the throne, you become one with nature or maybe it's just a happy coincidence. Whatever the reason, it definitely gives new meaning to the expression "When nature calls".

However, one sighting from the throne this summer of 2003 takes the cake or should I say, "takes the toilet paper" in the interesting sighting category. On one particular day, when nature happened to call, I walked the path to the throne, making sure to change the sign from "vacant" to "occupied". Once there, I noticed that there was toilet paper unraveled from the dispenser and sprawled out over the ground. I found this a little unusual, and since I had plenty of time to think and no better place to do it in, I attempted to *unravel* the mystery. However, even with the thought stimulating capability of the throne, the only thing I could come up with was that either the other field staff out here was being extra vigorous in her toilet paper swipes or that the wind had managed to pull it out. Since Tara then told me she had experienced the same phenomenon, I then had only the wind to blame.

After this incident had occurred a couple of times, I was sitting on the throne, frustrated from constantly picking up toilet paper from the ground, and I happened to notice a Least Flycatcher approaching straight towards me. It was flying from branch to branch almost as if driven by some purpose in mind. I sat perfectly still and was amazed that it just kept getting closer until it was only two feet away on a poplar sapling straight in front of me. It halted there as it finally took notice of me, stared me down for a moment, and then fluttered off. I was thrilled to get such a personal encounter with the flycatcher, the bird that dominates the airways of the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area, and I chalked it up as another great throne sighting.

It was just a few minutes later that I fully understood the reason behind the close encounter, and on top of that the answer to the toilet paper mystery. I watched the bird as it flew around me and then it perched on an almost fully constructed nest a few meters away, which just happened to be completely lined in toilet paper. This resourceful little flycatcher had been stealing off with our toilet paper and using it for nesting material. It probably realized that this was the jackpot, a never-ending supply of the most pillowy soft material in the entire natural area and what better material could a mother provide for her little nestlings. It was one of the most amusing bird interactions this summer and the nest was always good for a chuckle every time one made a trip to the throne.



If the story could not get any better, the nest ended up having a successful clutch of three nestling Least Flycatchers, but only after a considerable amount of effort. An earlier clutch of two eggs was abandoned when it was parasitized by a Brown-headed Cowbird. However, the flycatcher fought back and removed all the eggs to make room for the new successful clutch. The nestlings were eventually seen for the last time fresh off the nest on a nearby branch being fed by a very dedicated and resourceful parent. Great sightings continue to be seen from the BBO throne, but its going to be hard to beat the sighting of the toilet paper bandit.

Additional Info: BBO is located about 75km east of Edmonton, near Tofield, Alberta on the south end of Beaverhill Lake.