

Kinglet Killer

Jean Iron

On 9 October 2001 while birding in Brookbanks Ravine near my house in Toronto, another walker told me about the little birds that were “trapped in thistles.” Intrigued, I went to the spot and saw two dead kinglets hanging in the burs of Common Burdock (*Arctium minus*), one a Golden-crowned Kinglet and the other a Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

On 17 October 2001, I again checked the Common Burdock plants in Brookbanks Ravine for trapped birds. Along a 200 metre stretch I found 8 dead kinglets in the burdock burs, most were Golden-crowned. Figure 1. The birds were spread-winged, spread-tailed, and caught by many parts of their bodies, including the bill. The more they struggled, the more they became stuck. I estimated they had died over a period of few days to several weeks earlier.

While doing the Hamilton Naturalists Club Fall Bird Count in Centennial Park near Van Wagners Beach on 2 November 2001, I found a dead Golden-crowned Kinglet trapped in a patch of burdock.

Again in Brookbanks Ravine on 19 November 2001, Ron Pittaway and I found a freshly dead Golden-crowned Kinglet trapped by the burs of burdock.

Common Burdock is a plant with large flat leaves that look like rhubarb. Figure 2. The flowers resemble thistles and when they die the seeds form a round ball that attaches by its barbed velcro-like hooks to clothing, dogs, and anything it touches. Common Burdock grows 1-1.5 metres tall or more. Each stalk is loaded with round balls of seeds surrounded by hooks. After a walk through a waste or brushy area, the odds are that you have had these burs clinging to your clothing. Burdock is not a native North American plant; but was introduced from Europe.

I wondered why there were so many dead kinglets in this stretch of Brookbanks Ravine. The burdock plants were close to the creek and the edge of the woods. They were growing close to goldenrod, asters, wild grape and other fruit and seed-bearing plants. When the kinglets migrated through in September and October, they probably gleaned insects from the flowers and seed heads of goldenrod and other plants and inadvertently became trapped in the burdock. Because of their small size, many kinglets were unable to escape and became more stuck as they struggled. On 19 October, I noticed House Sparrows going in and out of the burdock, but did not find any of this species entangled.

Mark Kubitz (1989) reported finding a Golden-crowned Kinglet trapped in burdock in May 1989. A spring occurrence is unusual as most birds are trapped in



Figure 1: Freshly dead Golden-crowned Kinglet killed by being entangled in the burs of Common Burdock in Brookbanks Ravine, Toronto, Ontario on 17 October 2001. Photo by Jean Iron.



Figure 2: Basal leaf of Common Burdock with a “tonie” for scale showing the large size of mature leaves. Seed plant in fall is often 1.5 metres high or more and loaded with sticky burs. Photo 19 November 2001 by Jean Iron.

the fall. He located literature reports that involved the following birds killed by burdock: Blue-headed Vireo, American Goldfinch, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Pine Siskin and Black-capped Chickadee.

Brewer (1994) reported finding a dead Blue-gray Gnatcatcher caught in burdock. Martin McNicoll (1994) updated the literature review and reported the following being hooked: Magnolia Warbler, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a warbler sp. Even small bats have been killed in this way.

In Bent (1949), James G. Needham in 1909 describes finding "scores" of Golden-crowned Kinglets entangled in the hooks of the ripening heads of burdocks one autumn in a partly wooded pasture near Lake Forest, Illinois. Needham wrote, "They were visible in all directions, scores of them sticking to the tops of the clumps on the most exposed clusters of heads. The struggle had ended fatally for all that I saw, and its severity was evidenced by the attitudes of their bodies and the disheveled condition of their plumage. I examined a number of the burdock heads to determine what attraction had brought the kinglets within range of the hooks, and found insect larvae of two species present in considerable abundance. Most abundant were the seed-eating larvae of an obscure little moth (*Metzgeria tapella*), but the larvae of the well known burdock weevil were also present in some numbers. Doubtless, it was in attempting to get these larvae that the kinglets (mostly young birds) were captured."

Small birds like kinglets stand no chance against burdock, whose seed heads are a mass of barbed hooks. I got a barbed seed stem in my eye and had to go to an eye specialist to have it removed.

This summer I will be cutting the large basal leaves of burdock plants before they flower and set burs. I urge others to remove this deadly plant in your area to save the lives of many small birds.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

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Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas

Mike Cadman

The Atlas is into its second year and things are going very well, but there are still birders who are not participating, so we've taken some steps to make it easier than ever for people to take part. We have developed "Casual Observation Cards", which are intended to make it easy for anyone to report birds to the atlas - whether or not you actually cover a particular 10 km square for the project.

The cards are 5x7" and fit easily into your glove compartment. When you observe breeding evidence for a bird (which can be as simple as a bird in its breeding habitat in its breeding season), you can enter the specifics on this form. You'll need to know the atlas square number, so it's best to get a regional map from your atlas Regional Coordinator along with the supply of data cards. Don't report every robin you might see, but any reasonably uncommon bird or confirmed breeding evidence for any species would be important to report.

The cards can be used anywhere in Ontario. If you're travelling around, keep a supply with you. There is space to report up to 15 records on any one card in one atlas region. If you spend more time in any one spot and have more than 15 species, we would hope you'll fill in a full breeding evidence form.

The cards, regional maps and Atlas Guide for participants are available from Regional Coordinators, who are listed on the atlas web page: www.birdsontario.org

If you haven't seen the data from the first year of the atlas, look on the web page. There are some fascinating findings already. See for example, the maps for the Merlin, Raven, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Northern Mockingbird. Much has changed in the past 20 years, and I'm sure we'll find out a lot more by the time the project is complete.

If you have any questions about the project, talk to your Regional Coordinator, or contact the atlas office at 1-866-900-7100, e-mail: atlas@uoguelph.ca

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