SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) CHOKES ON A LIVE OAK (*Quercus*) ACORN

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Prey size that is poorly selected can indeed lead to dire consequences for an individual (Krebs et al. 1977.). Consequences of a wrong decision leading to death of the consumer are rarely documented (Wolf and Jones 1989, Holte and Houck 2000), and therefore are of interest in regards to optimal foraging theory. Herein we report a case of a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) choking on a live oak (*Quercus virginianus*) acorn.

On 19 October 2000 we received a salvaged Blue Jay (HMNS-VO 987) that was found dead two weeks prior in an urban park landscape dominated by live oak, in the city of Houston, Texas. When we went to prepare the bird as a study specimen on 25 October 2000, one of the first steps was putting cotton in the gullet to prevent blood from contaminating the feathers during skinning. At this time, we discovered a hulled acorn (12.5 mm^2) from a live oak in the throat of the bird, suggesting the bird choked to death. The acorn was lodged in the gullet quite well, difficult to remove even with a pair of needlepoint tweezers.

Jays typically pulverize large, or hard foods such as acorns with their mandible prior to ingestion (Bent 1964, Brooks pers. obs.). This is apparently what the bird was doing, as shown by the pulverized yellow endocarp of acorns in its gizzard. The acorn the bird choked on was cracked, suggesting it was only partially pulverized with the bill prior to ingestion, but not enough to permit complete passage through the gullet.

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Mandibular width is indicative of gape and size of food taken (Wheelright 1985). The width of the bird's mandible was only 14 mm, leaving only 1.5 mm of clearance for the acorn. Moreover, the width of the gullet itself was even narrower. The bird apparently made an inappropriate decision to attempt consumption of an acorn too large to swallow without proper mastication. Part of the poor foraging decision may be related to inexperience due to younger age. Concordant with this hypothesis, the unossified skull windows and reduced ovaries suggested this bird was indeed a subadult.

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