

AN AMAZING OCCURRENCE OF BALTIMORE ORIOLES

In mid-December, your Editor received a letter from a new bander, Anna N. Wanek (Mrs. Ernest Wanek), 5 Davidson Avenue, Ramsey, New Jersey, which contained the following astonishing news:

"On Monday morning, December 8, about 8:15, I experienced a 'thrill of a lifetime'. About thirty or more Baltimore Orioles (*Icterus galbula*) descended on our yard, concentrating on food shelves, fortunately stocked at the time with oatmeal and raisins in addition to the customary seeds. The majority of the flock were females. They disported themselves close to the house until after one o'clock that day.

"The traps were set, also baited with oatmeal and raisins, but alas, only a solitary female was intrepid enough to venture into involuntary confinement. The disappointing record at the traps, however, was well compensated for by the flashing exhibition which I understand was entirely out of season and against the rules."

Needless to say, the Editor was completely flabbergasted by this letter, even to the extent of being completely unable to know how to write a diplomatic letter for additional confirmation! Fortunately, a second letter from Mrs. Wanek, dated December 21, arrived to confirm what he was reluctant to accept. She said:

"Some days ago I had the audacity to report to you, without confirmation, the visit to our vicinity of thirty Baltimore Orioles. I should have realized not only that this is not the season for them in this latitude, but that this species does not travel in flocks.

"Yesterday, the twentieth, my husband brought to the door a single-coll trap into which another female Baltimore Oriole, I was sure, had found its way.

"The find was taken to Mrs. Eleanor Dater who confirmed our suspicion. Nevertheless, Mrs. Dater telephoned your good friend, Mr. Charles Nichols of the American Museum. Mr. Nichols graciously paid us a visit, and now we know beyond any doubt that our identification was correct, in the main. I must make this qualification since Mr. Nichols disclosed the bird was an immature male.

"He will report the visit not only of the individual but also of the whole flock in 'Audubon Field Notes'."

A third letter, dated December 23, arrived from Mr. Nichols, from which we quote.

"I think you have a note on a flock of Baltimore Orioles; thirty were counted and one banded. I was not at all inclined to accept the record, it was too fantastic. Saturday last, the bander called me to tell me she had trapped another. I hurried to the place and, sure enough, she had a Baltimore Oriole, a female. As it carried no band, it was not the bird formerly trapped. But thirty? Still I think it must be accepted." (Perhaps Mr. Nichols inadvertently mentioned 'female' rather than 'immature male' as stated by Mrs. Wanek; if it was not an immature male which was involved on December 20, we will carry a correction in a later issue.—Ed.)

With this record we have another chapter in the story of the changing status of another of our familiar birds. Miss Margaret S. Goodwin, of Earnley Farm, Route 5, West Chester, Pa., hearing about this record, kindly forwarded a copy of the January-February 1952 issue, volume VIII, number 1, of "Maryland Birdlife", on pages 10-11, of which Hervey Brackbill writes about Baltimore Orioles in Maryland in winter. He reports two individuals, one, a male, at Towson, Baltimore County, on January 4, 1951 (fide Jack Kaufmann), and another, a female, in the Walbrook section of Baltimore City, on January (fide Mr. and Mrs. C. Walter Lane and Miss Mary E. Lane); the female stayed on through February 21, and Mr. Brackbill confirmed the identification. Suet and halved grapes attracted and sustained these birds.

Brackbill (Ibid.) calls attention to an oriole seen at Mount Joy, Lancaster County, Pa., February 4, 1951 ("Bull. Lancaster Co. Bird Club", 22: 10, 1951).

Chandler S. Robbins, Editor of "Maryland Birdlife" (Ibid.), in a footnote, calls attention to additional occurrences of this species reported to the Fish and Wildlife Service during the same winter in late December, January, or February, from Newburyport, Mass., New London, Conn., Lexington, Va., Jamestown, Ballston Lake, and Baldwin, N.Y., and Youngston, Ohio.

Herbert L. Stoddard, Sr., of Sherwood Plantations, Thomasville, Georgia, writing in "The Auk" (68, 1: 108-110, 1951) about the occurrence of the Baltimore Oriole in southwest Georgia and the southern coastal plain, states that the appearance of the species coincides with cold-fronts. He attributes the increasing wintering habits of the species to the profound ecological changes in that region of Georgia and south Carolina, changes that are being brought about by changes in agricultural practice.

To this writer, it would appear that such ecological changes may not be the reason for the establishment of the wintering habit in that part of the south. It is of course true that changes in the nature of the ground cover and type of food supply are favorable to some species of birds and unfavorable to others, with consequent shifting of ranges, and in the case of orioles, the changes are favorable to their having an adequate winter food supply. On the other hand, no such marked change has occurred in recent years in the available food supply in New England and the Middle Atlantic States, from which areas quite a number of records have come.

It may well be, that, under certain conditions, records are correlated with the appearance of cold fronts; information on which to base such a generalization is lacking for most of the records.

That the Baltimore Oriole may be extending its winter range northward is a distinct possibility, although a shift, in the northern limit of the winter range from southern Mexico to Georgia and South Carolina within a few years seems rather drastic. Furthermore, Forbush ("Birds of Massachusetts", 1925, II, 443-444) cites four midwinter records for that state, and Albert Conway advises the writer of three winter records in the Philadelphia region: one dead at Haddonfield, N.J., Jan. 16, 1912 (R. T. Moore); Swarthmore, Pa., Dec. 26, 1919 (S. C. Palmer); and one found dead at Tyncote, Pa., Dec. 27, 1919 (E. H. Baynes). These records for many years ago as well as others which undoubtedly have not come to our attention would lead us not to draw too hasty conclusions as to the uniqueness of the present occurrences or to the possible long-term changes which they may presage.--J. R. Conway (See page 9, this issue, for additional oriole records received since this was written.—Ed.)