

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON REDPOLLS

By Eva F. Schnitzer

A visit from those erratic birds, the redpolls, was no surprise to my husband and me when they appeared at our home in Union in the spring of 1956. In previous years whenever these birds had been reported in the northeast, some invariably appeared in our wooded area, attracted no doubt by the many birches in our locality.

Between March 24 and March 29 we trapped 261 redpolls, handling them a total of 444 times. In all 259 of these birds were banded, of which 59 repeated 156 times. During the handling, 27 birds escaped before they could be banded. One bird with an injured leg was released unbanded, and another, held overnight, died. Inclement weather and our own numb fingers prevented us from making a much larger count.

The breakdown of figures for the six day period may be of interest:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Banded</u>	<u>Repeats</u>	<u>Escaped</u>	<u>Total</u>
24	64	4	4	72
25	53	17	6	76
26	65	52	5	122
27	48	33	10	91
28	26	39	2	67
<u>29</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>14</u>
	259	156	27	442
	2*			2*
	<u>261</u>			<u>444</u>

* One bird released unbanded, one bird a casualty.

About 75 redpolls were noticed in the late afternoon of Friday, March 23, feeding on catkins fallen to the ground and hanging from the branches of the birches. No traps were in operation at that time because of stormy weather.

The first birds were taken late Saturday morning, March 24, in snow, sleet and rain. Worry lest the flock move on, and there be no further opportunity to band this comparatively infrequently trapped bird led us to break a self-imposed rule not to band in wet weather. The last birds were taken early Friday morning, March 29, when heavy rains caused cessation of all banding. Redpolls remained in fair numbers until Tuesday, April 2. At 9 that morning the last observation was made: 6 redpolls seen, 4 of them banded. We were not available to band between Friday and Tuesday. The visit was of 12 days duration.

The traps consisted of one Seth Low all-purpose trap, six 3-celled Potters, and one Brenckle, all baited with wild bird seed. Birds were collected every two hours.

The severe weather which persisted throughout the period and the discomfort of banding outdoors in raw temperatures slowed us considerably. Our fingers, stiff with cold, permitted the escape of more than the usual number of birds. However, the greatest trial was in keeping constant watch for neighbors' cats and dogs, squirrels and such larger birds as starlings, grackles, redwings, cowbirds and pigeons.

On March 27 and 28, days of the lowest figures yet of the heaviest redpoll concentrations, it was necessary on seven occasions to lift up one end of the Seth Low trap, thus permitting all the birds to escape. This was imperative in order to rid the trap of squirrels and larger birds which were terrifying the smaller ones, not by attacking them, but by the turmoil they created in their frantic efforts to escape.

Of course, the larger birds might have been gathered together with the redpolls but there was danger of injuries. In gathering the smaller birds it was not unusual to get 10 to 15 simultaneously in the gathering tunnel. A grackle or several redwings in the narrow confines might have been disastrous. However, white-throats, juncos and fox sparrows had no ill effects upon the smaller birds. They were completely compatible, fed together peaceably, and were taken and banded together without difficulty.

In general, larger birds feeding in the same area kept the number of redpolls down, and the flock, rather than remaining concentrated in the area of the baited traps, spread itself over a wider area feeding in the neighbors' birches and in the nearby woods where similar trees grew abundantly.

Saturday, March 24, our first banding day, the traps were emptied for the fifth and last time at 5:30 p.m. Thirty birds, consisting of 28 redpolls, one white-throat, and one cowbird, were taken into the kitchen of our house so that we might band them in comfort. They refused, when released, to fly out into the darkness and remained motionless in the hand. There was no alternative but to keep them overnight.

The redpolls were placed in seven single-cell gathering cages, and the white-throat and cowbird in our two remaining cages. The next morning a of the birds were fresh but one of the redpolls which lay dead at one end of its cage. We were unable to determine the cause of its death. Close examination revealed no visible injury or parasitic infestation.

The birds were released at 6 a.m. the next morning. Their chirping had been audible all through the night despite the coverings placed over

their cages. Some of the birds when retrapped later showed no adverse effects from the night's unorthodox lodging.

No direct count of the number of birds in the flock was ever possible because the whole flock was never visible from any one position. Furthermore, they flew about in such a confused pattern as to preclude the possibility of counting. Therefore we used our banding figures to estimate the total number, reasoning as follows:

First we had to determine that we were dealing with a fairly constant flock rather than an ever varying number. If the number was constant, our percentage of repeats each day compared with the total number taken each day should ever increase. From the above table we get:

4	out of 68	equals	6%
17	" " 70	"	24%
52	" " 117	"	45%
33	" " 81	"	40%
39	" " 65	"	60%

The reasonably constant increase, we believe, indicates that the flock was constant.

Therefore, any sample taken on the last day, provided it was a reasonably representative sample, should contain the same ratio of banded to total birds as existed in the whole flock. That is: 11:14 as 259:x where x is the total number.

Thus we arrive at a total of 330 individuals in the whole flock. Of course any deviation from true representation in the last sample would invalidate the figures. Further, it would strain credulity to suppose that that last sample was really representative. Nevertheless, the result is reasonably plausible, and does agree reasonably well with the estimate we made on the scene of 350 birds in the shifting, swirling mass.

The following plumage observations were of interest. One bird showed gold on the crown rather than red, and yellowish wash rather than pink on the head and body. One bird had a brown poll rather than red, no pink wash anywhere, and appeared as a brown-streaked bird. The majority, one hundred and fifty birds, had red polls and pink washes on the neck, and/or on the sides, chest and rump, in varying intensity and abundance. One hundred nine birds had red polls but no pink coloration elsewhere.

The birds were at first exceedingly tame and docile, but became less manageable as the days went by, finally biting and struggling in the hand. Generally birds taken in the morning were quieter vocally and less active while being banded than birds taken in the afternoon. We wondered if

approaching night made the birds more nervous, or if a day of feeding under artificial conditions produced symptoms more evident as the day progressed. Morning birds were largely those with red polls and little pink coloration. Afternoon birds were largely the more brilliantly colored ones. Was it possible, we asked, that within the flock there were subdivisions as to age and sex? Based on plumage similarities there seemed to be a separation of sorts during the feeding day.

The greatest concentration of birds was noted between 3 and 6 p.m. during which time the greatest number was taken. This held true even for repeats. Might this indicate perhaps that the flock spread out during the day but as night approached the birds collected and roosted en masse for the night?

There were two strangers with the flock. A single Tree Sparrow appeared on March 24, was banded, and was observed four times feeding with the redpolls, the last time on March 28. A Pine Siskin was observed once on Sunday, March 25. Since Tree Sparrows and Pine Siskins were a rarity in our area, we surmised that they were part of the redpoll flock.

One redpoll, taken on March 26, had an injured and bleeding leg. Examination revealed that the left leg was broken and dangling. The fresh wound indicated the bird had been injured in the trap. It was hospitalized and released on March 29 when it seemed quite vigorous and capable of fending for itself. It flew off without difficulty and joined other members of the flock. It was observed again on Monday morning, April 2 at the kitchen feeder, perched on one leg, the other drawn up close against its body. It had been released unbanded. We had decided that its chance of survival might be greater if its one good leg were not encumbered. We wonder how much of a detriment a band may be to a one-legged bird.

Snow once again fell on the morning of April 17. Among the birds feeding in the area were a single unbanded redpoll and an unbanded Tree Sparrow. These were probably stragglers from the big flock for no further invasion developed.

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EXPERIMENT WITH BAITS Mud, horsehair from over-stuffed furniture, oranges cut in half, boiled raisins and some of the most unlikely baits can be used with great success at certain times, writes Geoffrey Gill. Don't be afraid to experiment, he adds. The Fraziers learned from Geoff years ago the attraction of dogwood berries -- and went on to use the red berries from barberry bushes when dogwood berries were no longer to be found. These red berries draw in many thrushes in the autumn migration period.
