

BANDING IN EUROPE: BAT FOWLING

By M. J. Thomas

The vulgar starling - the ubiquitous *Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris* - is a good friend of mine, and I am always pleased to find one in one of my traps. This bird has provided me with my most interesting recoveries (one from Russia, banded in England), and indeed with my first American recovery, reported just a few days ago.

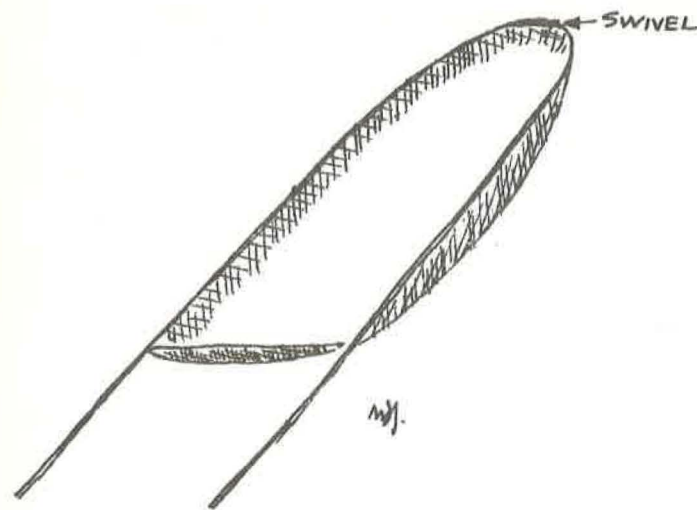
In England, we have a large resident population, augmented in winter by considerable numbers of birds from Europe. Those who have been to England may be familiar with the nocturnal Starling roosts in our main city centers. Many Starlings also roost not in the towns but in enormous roosts in the countryside. It is in these rural roosts that the bat-fowlingers enjoy their eccentric pastime.

The roost that I am familiar with was in a twenty acre copse, a copse of bushes and many thickets. In January and February this was the night home of some twenty thousand starlings. Every bush was weighted down with the birds, and the guano carpet gave off light and smell which is not easily forgotten.

Our banding expeditions usually consisted of a party of some twenty people. We would divide into three groups: beaters, batters, and banders. The beaters would go up-wind to the margins of the roost before the birds came in for the night. The batters would move right into the middle of the roost, two to a bat-fowling net. We would string across the width of the roost. The net consists of a pair of bamboo poles, twelve feet high, which are joined at the top. One holds a pole in each hand, the net up above one's head. When the birds fly into it, the poles are brought together with a circular motion, forming a pocket in which the birds are trapped.

When we were in position we would settle down for half an hour or so, whilst the birds came in to roost. To me, this was the most interesting part. In the half light, flock after flock of starlings would fly over, then funnel down like a tornado into the roost, a cloud emptying out its burden of birds.

At the appointed hour, the beaters would leap up, shriek, shout, squeak, and stampede all the birds in their vicinity downwind in a wave into our nets, now held at the ready above the top of the bushes. It is a never-to-be-forgotten experience, standing with the net above one's head, hearing the beaters' shrieks, and then, seconds later, hearing a whoosh of wings and seeing birds spilling into the net. When the net was hit by the wave, it was quickly closed and brought down. With your assistant, you would quickly extract the birds and put them into catching boxes, ready for another beat. We would have five or six beats an evening. It



THE BAT FOWLING-NET

was our practice to send out our catching boxes after each beat to the banders who would have a van set up for banding and recording. In a good evening we would band over three hundred birds. It was one of them that, banded in February, was recovered in western Russia the following April.

As with so many of one's banding experiences, it was the atmosphere that was not only pungent but also full of excitement. Who can forget the tension on a cold February night, surrounded by chattering birds, with two minutes to go before the first beat? This more than made up for the fact that for several days after, one would be carrying around the aroma of the bat-fowling roost, no matter how many baths one took.

Syracuse, N. Y.

RETRAP OF
WHITE-CROWN
SPARROW

Raymond Bubb, 917 Madison Ave., York, Pa., writes: "The White-crowned Sparrow is only a winter visitor to us here in the southeastern part of Pennsylvania so the banding I've done on them has been during the fall. Last year, being a new and inexperienced bander I was only able to net ten birds in three tries at a large multiflora rose hedge at East Prospect in York County, Pa. My first foreign retrap was with this species: an adult carrying band no. 27-122198 from Watertown, N.Y., 280 miles directly north of us, banded by Marie Elitharp on October 13, 1959 and retrapped on November 14, 1959. Now, this year I netted at the same area and banded 13 birds so far in two trips. Also, I retrapped two out of the ten that I had banded last year. I feel this is a most interesting start on a study about this visitor to us. I would like to hear of the experiences other banders have had regarding this species."
