BANDING THRUSHES AT MAXADA WOODLANDS

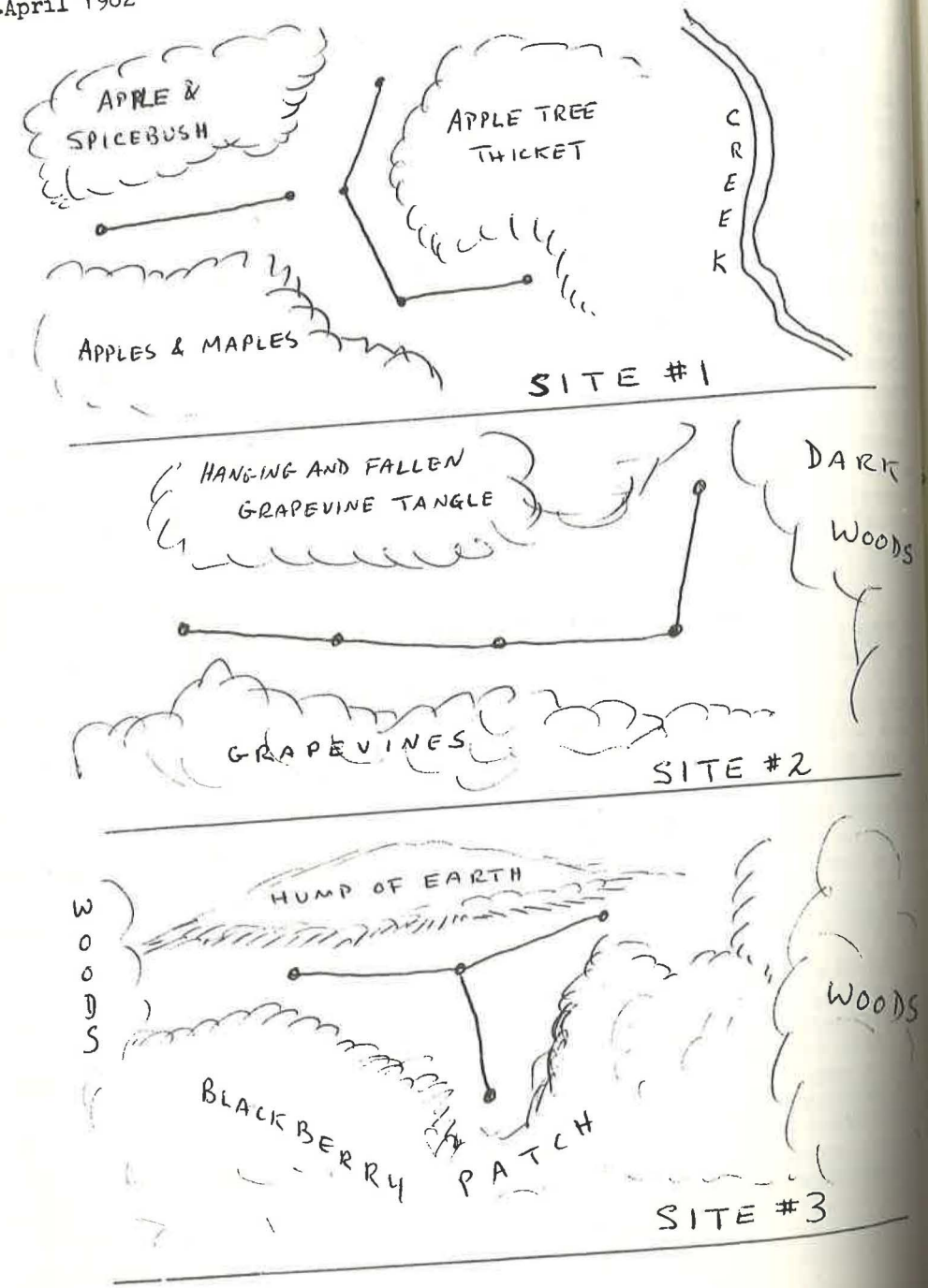
By Joseph A. Grom

Because of my apparently unusual success with banding thrushes of the genus Hylocichla, I have been asked to give a brief account of my activities in this regard. Perhaps a description of the banding areas where the greatest successes were achieved should be of primary concern.

At one time this whole section of the North Hills suburban area of Pittsburgh was farmland. For the past fifty to seventy-five years more and more of the land has been abandoned to nature, so that now the land is grown up to brushy fields, densely overgrown hawthorn thickets and apple orchards, and scattered stands of more mature hardwoods such as maples and oaks. Besides the hawthorns two characteristic shrubs of the shady woodland areas are the dogwood (C. florida) and the spicebush (Lindera benzoin). In the woodland openings are thick tangles of grapevine, poison ivy, Virginia creeper, and blackberry patches. The wild black cherry (P. serotina) has taken hold and is spreading. All these plants, it is to be noted, produce fruiting bodies eagerly sought by many birds, including especially the thrushes. The cherry, dogwood, and spicebush in particular are also host plants to the larvae of countless hordes of various geometrid moths and other avian delicacies.

With this in mind net lanes were cut in the woods in spots where, it was felt, the maximum concentration of birds might occur. Accordingly, a lane was cut through a stand of spicebush shrubs and dense apple trees, which had the added attraction of being at the edge of a very dark woods and in an extremely wet bottomland through which flowed a small creek - the only permanent natural water supply for several hundred yards in any direction. A second lane on a drier hillside ran directly through the center and then skirted the edge of a large grapevine tangle in a woodland opening. A third lane was established just next to a clearing overgrown with blackberry canes. The nets were placed at this last site near a large hump of earth so that birds in flight to the blackberry cover had to go over the mound and down into the nets. Three, four or five nets were used at each site.

As time went by, it was found to be advantageous to lower the bottom shelf strings on all nets to within three or four inches of the ground and even at times to the ground. This helped capture thrushes and ovenbirds that would otherwise have hopped or walked under the more conventional eight to ten inch height. During the spring and fall migrations the nets were open constantly except for a week of steady rain at the height of the spring (1960) migration. The first check was made about one hour after daybreak, the last check by flashlight in the evening. Nets were patrolled on the average about once every hour. Most of the thrushes were netted between 7 and 9 am. and again after 6:30 pm. No bird was ever caught at night.



Very few thrushes sustained crippling injuries: it was our experience that thrushes tend to lie still until approached. An occasional thrush cut its wings slightly where the loose skin between the bend and the body rubbed against the netting. Wood Thrushes more than any other species of bird catch their tongues in the mesh. A few toothpicks carried along for the purpose make disentangling a relatively minor operation.

Because the nets were placed in the woods, predation averaged somewhat higher than most banders seem to encounter. Perhaps as high as 3% of the total is the estimate of known casualties. The worst enemy of the netted bird is the domestic cat, left to fend for itself. Chipmunks run a close second, evidently being able to climb the netting to reach an intended victim. A few rat traps, baited with the remains of fresh victims, judiciously placed - however reluctantly - help to eliminate the chipmunks.

Banding in the dark woods has three distinct drawbacks: the higher incidence of predation just discussed, the missing of many birds moving through the upper foliage of the many tall trees, and the time-consuming, not to mention nerve-fraying, chore of leaf removal in the fall.

That great numbers of thrushes and certain warblers can be taken in a woods such as here described is evident from the following monthly table compiled during 1960. The species listed here are typical of the habitat in which nets were operated. SR=summer resident; M=migrant.

		Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	TOTAL
Ovenbird	SR	2	52	3	5	44	83	3	192
Kentucky Warbler	SR		16	5	7	16	2		46
Hooded Warbler	SR		26			13	17		56
Wood Thrush	SR	3	46	9	5	39	163	27	292
Veery	SR	2	30	4	2	40	32		110
Gray-cheeked Thrush	M		2				34	8	44
Swainson's Thrush	M	4	30				211	29	274
Hermit Thrush	M	1					1	5	7
T o t a l		12	202	21	19	152	543	72	1,021

Gibsonia, Pennsylvania ★★★