

COMMENTS ON "STRAYS AND STRAGGLERS"
By Russell J. Rutter

I found the paper on "Strays and Stragglers", by John V. Dennis (EBBA News 25:5-6) particularly stimulating. I think Mr. Dennis made it clear that his subject is not one which lends itself to final statements, and he presents it as a discussion and an expression of a number of rather well-documented opinions. I venture to offer the following comments, in no sense as criticism, but simply as a continuation of the discussion:

It seems to be reasonably well established that birds acquire a "migratory urge" at certain seasons, and that this persists for a limited period. If the bird is prevented by any cause from migrating during this period, the urge is lost, and it tends to remain where it is, even under unfavorable conditions. The possibility is suggested, therefore, that many strays, in completely new environment and different climate, never do acquire the normal urge to migrate, even in the period when they would normally do so. Perhaps Mr. Dennis has this in mind when he distinguished between "weather strays" and "mutants," but I think it is a point worth clarifying. There is a rather widespread feeling among ornithologists that few, if any, of these stray birds ever find their way back to their ancestral home.

Perhaps I am misreading Mr. Dennis, but he seems to me to imply subjective motivations on the part of migrating (or lost) birds which it would be difficult to support by evidence. If I may be allowed to quote from his paper (on strays in New England):

"The severity of northern winters permits few of these visitors to remain. The exodus of Chats, Lark Sparrows, Western Kingbirds, etc.... begins well before winter sets in....Timing their appearances, as a rule, with the cold fronts that bring the big movements of other migrants, these birds move along with the rest....This exodus continues into late fall and usually only a few Chats are still around at the time of the Christmas bird counts....Farther south there is less need of moving on to escape the hazards of cold or of a diminishing food supply."

Can we dismiss the possibility that the Chats which are "not around" at Christmas have succumbed to an unfavorable environment? And, little as we know of the complicated motivations governing the migrations of birds, it is surely evident that a conscious movement to "escape the hazards of cold or a diminishing food supply" plays a very minor part. It is true this end is accomplished, but few people would contend that birds which leave the northern States and Canada in August, when food and cover are at their best, are able to foresee the approaching winter.

The two examples following provide first-hand illustrations of what may happen to some stray or lost birds:

On October 8, 1962, I caught a Lark Sparrow in an all-purpose trap in Algonquin Park, Ontario. This was a "first" for the Park; there are only two other records, sight only, for this general area, which is removed several hundred miles from normal Lark Sparrow range. There was the usual question of whether or not the bird should be collected, but I chose to take a series of identifiable photographs, band it, and let it go. At that time it was associating with Juncos, White-throats, and other ground-feeding sparrows, and it repeated a number of times up to October 24, when we had our first snow and I ceased to operate the trap. All the regular migrants had disappeared, but the Lark Sparrow was still there. Within two days the ground was covered by several inches of snow and it spent most of its time on the only bare earth available, in the lee of the building. It must be admitted that this experiment was not carried to its ultimate conclusion, but as I had no doubt what that would be in a country which has from two to four feet of snow for several months and temperature as low as 40 degrees below zero, and as I had to move to another location at that time, on October 27 I retrapped the Lark Sparrow and have since held it in captivity. At the end of 1962 it appears to be thriving, and is molting into a considerably brighter plumage. I supposed it to be an immature when captured.

The second example involves a Robin, an abundant summer resident of the Huntsville region. In December, 1959, a Robin was seen several times in the town, apparently a normal, healthy bird, and the local nature club looked forward to adding this species to their Christmas Census list. At Christmas the temperature went to 15 below zero, followed in a day or two by freezing rain, and on census day, December 27, the Robin was found dead, in a thicket of mixed shrubbery where it had been seen several times before. An autopsy showed it to be in good flesh, but with no visible fat, and its stomach contained five unidentifiable seeds. There was no indication of disease or injury.

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HAWK & SNOWY OWL REPORTS WANTED
By Edwin C. Weiland

I am collecting data on Hawk & Snowy Owls. If you have or know of any recent sightings for your area would you please let me know. So far I have 22 Hawk Owl reports for Upper Michigan and 8 for northern Minnesota which is very unusual. I am trying to find out why and to what extent they are coming down. Weather has been so ideal it can hardly be a factor. Food shortage? -- but what? Any help or data you can give me will be most welcome.

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