



## Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie

The Life of Birds. Joel Carl Welty, 1963. Alfred Knopf, New York. \$12.95

The jacket blurb on this book states: "A comprehensive survey of all that is known about birds - a permanent reference book for bird enthusiasts that is a joy to read." This sounds so impossible that it may seem as if the publisher had indulged in extravagant and wishful thinking. Yet I came across a review of this book in which the critic claimed it was hard for him to remember that he was not a press agent.

Since I don't claim to be a proper reviewer I can be enthusiastic without restraint. My first reaction was that the author must have read everything that has ever been written about birds since the dawn of history. Although this seems an impossible feat, the book is super-comprehensive.

There are too many scientists who do not possess a facile enough command of the English language to present their research findings either effectively or popularly. Dr. Welty is a master of word use, and his book could be recommended as an English lesson in terseness and clarity. Its perusal and comprehension are painless, the text flows like a fascinating mystery story with new ideas confronting the reader on every page. There is effective combining of economy of words with picturesque phrasing. And, like raisins in a pudding, there are frequent delightful bits of humor.

In a brief introductory paragraph Dr. Welty speaks of the unevenness in the quality of ornithological writings: from "ecstatic, subjective, undependable pieces about 'our little feathered friends' to erudite and accurate, but sometimes stuffy treatises on such themes as the metabolic uptake of radioactive isotopes."

He goes on to note that ornithologists are not included in scientific societies, "not worthy of the rank in academic 'peck order' that is accorded even to a specialist in tapeworms." Are you as horrified as I am by this incredible state of affairs?

Of course I'd like to gather you around and read the book aloud so that we could marvel together at this and chuckle at that. Instead I must choose only a few sparklers from the bulging treasure chest. There is mention of the Orpington chicken which was a laying hen for three and a half years, when it became a rooster and sired two chicks. Welty thinks the ovary was

probably destroyed by tumor, this causing a "natural, spontaneous reversal of sex which strikingly revealed the bisexual potentiality of birds."

In colony breeding there are often wave-like spasms of copulation. This promotes synchronized breeding so that chicks hatch at the same time, and simplifies the problem of defending them.

Unequal sex ratios are often apparent rather than real. "Very probably the sexes are often differentially vulnerable to predation (including hunting by man), diseases, accidents, parasites, malnutrition, temperature extremes, and other hazards." Females are probably more vulnerable to predators especially when they alone incubate and care for young.

The reproductive cycle is followed by a "refractory period." The normal termination of this period is often followed by singing and weak courtship behavior. Such a period is presumably due to the weakening or exhaustion of some critical component of the innate sexual rhythm. Should recovery from exhaustion occur at the wrong time of year, inhospitable conditions of the environment may act as a brake and hold back full velocity of reproductive activity until the following spring. Now we know why birds sing in the fall.

"A function of territory commonly overlooked is evolutionary selection within the species, which may be promoted by geographical spread. Territorialism brings into play two antagonistic forces, one dynamic and centrifugal, the other stable and centripetal." "Territory confers remarkable psychological benefits on its owner." "A bird is ordinarily invincible in its own territory, or, as Lack puts it, victory 'goes not to the strong but to the righteous, the rightsous, of course, being the owner of the property.'"

The illustrations by Norman Tolson in black and white are well done and effective. The photographic illustrations, mostly by E. Hosking and G. R. Austing, are especially good. This does not mean that the reproductions are of the quality found in art books, but that the originals are outstanding and, as here used, they are of pertinent value.

Notwithstanding his immense erudition, Dr. Welty is never pompous and never loses the human touch. "It seems altogether possible that the bird of paradise hanging upside down before his intended mate, and a small boy 'skinning the cat' on a tree limb in front of his best girl, are both expressing the same deep ancestral urge." "The hot-springs of love run deep and pervasive in the clay of all vertebrates. It is not surprising that their external bubblings appear to be much the same, whether in a university graduate, an Australian bushman, or a lowly sparrow."

What fun Dr. Welty's students at Beloit College must have!

Having tried to convey in a few hundred words a bit of the excitement of Dr. Welty's book, I paused to consider some of the books we have used in the past to keep us abreast of ornithological knowledge. There was a

book published in 1906 called "The Bird, Its Form and Function" which was written by C. William Beebe. I encountered this book at a somewhat later date. As I remember, its contents paralleled to some degree the outline of a college course I had taken in Embryology. The unforgettable impression this book made on me was its description of the heartbeat of a day-old chick. The author had evidently been as stunned as I had been at witnessing such an incredible miracle.

Then there was Frank M. Chapman's Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America, the first edition of which was published in 1895. We used the 1924 edition in conjunction with Chester Reed's pocket bird guide until the Peterson guide came along. Chapman's book combined introductory chapters on the "Study of Birds in Nature" with a bird guide, sparsely illustrated. (Can you imagine a bird-watching beginner trying to identify birds by description only?) Included in the introductory was a section on the equipment of the field student which included a collector's outfit, followed by instructions on collecting birds, nests, and eggs.

Years then passed during which the popular ornithological books, so far as I knew them, continued to be written along the lines of bird guides. There was Edward M. Forbush's "Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States" in three large volumes, beautifully illustrated in color by Fuertes and Brooks. This set is now a collector's item. There was Witmer Stone's "Bird Studies at Old Cape May" in two large volumes, well illustrated by Roland, Street, and others. This is also a collector's item. There was Taverner's "Birds of Western Canada", and other large tomes devoted to the birds of Minnesota, Louisiana, Florida, and so on, to say nothing of paperback studies of the bird life of counties and lesser areas.

It is characteristic of such publications that they are all fundamentally bird guides. To be sure there is much of ecology and distribution and habits included in the detailed descriptions, and the introductory chapters of Forbush and Stone make delightful as well as informative reading. But the emphasis is on the bird as a species and not as a representative of an homogenous group.

In 1959 Van Tyne and Berger co-authored "Fundamentals of Ornithology" which, according to the publishers, John Wiley and Sons, "offers the most complete glossary of ornithological terms since the publication in 1896 of Newton's "Dictionary of Birds." The co-authors place the emphasis on the bird as a distinct organism, and mention species usually only as examples of certain types of behavior and habits. They include chapters on anatomy, plumage, voice, distribution, flight, and so forth, and devote over 160 pages to "Classification of World Birds by Families."

Here finally appeared a book that the amateur bander, for instance, could use as a reference book. It has the complete glossary which Welty's book does not include; and devotes many pages to family classification as just mentioned, whereas Welty covers this in eight pages. However, if you are already familiar with the Van Tyne and Berger book, don't delude your-

self into thinking that Welty's book is just a rehash of the same material. As Welty notes, today there is a surge of experiment and rapid discovery in the science of ornithology, and he has a four years' advantage.

Mention might be made of the book entitled "Bird" by Lois and Louis Darling, published in 1962 by Houghton-Mifflin. In some ways this is a more elementary text, a book to give to a friend in the hope of converting him to an interest in birds. "Part I traces the evolution of birds. . . Part II discusses behavior. Part III takes up bird anatomy and physiology." The print is large, the black and white illustrations are clever, and no matter how well informed you may be, you will find the text entertaining and informative.

Now I wish everyone would write to the editor mentioning omissions from this list! not, of course, with the idea of a comprehensive bibliography of ornithology, but with the aim of adding to a list of special interest and value to the average bird bander.

313 Sharp Ave., Glenolden, Pa.



#### MICHIGAN B. B. A. "BAND-OUT"

Michigan Bird Banders Association invites Eastern Bird Banding Assoc. members to their Third Annual Spring Band-out, Friday, May 22, 4:30 P.M. through Sunday, May 24.

The Band-out will be at the Port Huron Game Area on M 136, 10 miles northwest of Port Huron, where Black River crosses M 136.

Primitive camping is allowed at the banding area -- and motels in the area always have rooms available at this time of year.

You will not need to make a reservation for the Band-out. Just come and join the banders for as much of the week end as possible. (This will be an excellent chance for anyone without a banding or netting permit to gain some experience.)

If you need additional information, write to Warren Lamb, 5069 24th Ave., Port Huron, Michigan.