

May-June

A Bird Bander's Diary

By Ralph K Bell



May 22 Left for Harper's Ferry, W. Va. this evening with some Brooks Bird Club members to join in the annual search for the very elusive (?) Sutton's Warbler. Each year an organized group of birders from the Brooks Bird Club (Wheeling, W. Va.) go to the area where Mike Haller and Lloyd Poland collected the two Sutton's Warblers in 1939.

May 23 Although we did not find the warbler we were looking for, the trip had its rewards. In the park along the Shenadoah River we heard and saw several Yellow-throated and Parula Warblers. There is a well founded suspicion that the Sutton's is a cross between these two warblers. Prothonotary Warblers were also along the river and a nest of the Hummingbird and Parula Warbler were found. In the farming areas nearby, at least two male Dickcissels were singing from the few trees along the road where there were two large alfalfa fields. We were listening for them as bander George Hall had commented earlier that they might be found in such an area if the roadside trees were scattered (to be used as singing perches). It seems that a woods bordering an alfalfa field is unsuitable to them. A very interesting side trip developed when bander Clark Miller took us to see the Worthington home. Antiques and artifacts of early America were very much in evidence as Miss Brisco (a descendant of the early settlers) graciously showed us about the place. The original home was built in 1730 and the main home started in 1784. The homes were attached and in excellent condition. We also visited John Brown's Civil War Show Case and took the bus trip to interesting points in the area. As the historical facts were narrated by the bus driver, accompanied by patriotic music from the record player, I felt we were all glad and proud of our heritage. EBBA members present were Dr. R. K. Burns, Gladys Cole, Orville Crowder, Dr. George Hall, Clark Miller, and Tom Olsen. It was a wonderful trip and over 100 species of birds were seen, but the Bluebird was conspicuous by its absence.

May 30 This was the day selected to band the young Red-tails. As Ralph Horn and I approached the area, we heard the Crows fussing with one of the adult Red-tails across the valley and knew that no one had

disturbed the nest. Steve Young, a gas line walker had showed me the nest over three weeks earlier and we had noticed that someone had been trying to climb to the nest. I had put a note on the tree kindly asking the intruders to please leave the young Red-tails alone, as they were protected and also very beneficial. Today, as we neared the nest, one of the adults came in carrying a mouse and soon both parents were circling high above the nest and giving their distress call. The young would stand up in the nest and answer back. This nest was in a Honey Locust (the only one I have ever seen in that kind of tree). After a very easy climb to the nest, a chalk line was dropped to Ralph and his camera was brought up. The usual fresh sprig of leaves was on the edge of the nest, and this one had been broken from an elm tree. Young Red-tails are truly beautiful creatures. These were still mostly covered with down and were so warm and soft. The wing feathers were about three inches long and some body feathers were appearing mostly on the back. The young Red-tails would make themselves look as big as possible when I reached to pick them up and would whimper softly while being banded. That inquisitive, questioning look they give after being put back in the nest cannot really be described, but it makes the effort worthwhile.

The accompanying picture shows them standing up in the nest.

(Ed. - We regret that the slide, from which we hoped to make the print to be reduced here, is somewhere between our camera store and the print maker.)

Taking a picture of hawks in a dead tree top is not easy, especially in this case, as I had to shade the camera from the sun with my hat in one hand, and use the other hand to hold the camera and take the picture. After taking four pictures, the camera was lowered to the ground again via the chalk line.

This maneuver brings to mind a former experience with Red-tails. Before I ever knew much about hawks, Dr. Samuel Dickey, an authority on birds in these parts, asked me to go along with him to West Virginia in search of hawk nests. We had a collectors permit then. Since I wanted to learn about hawks and he wanted someone to do the climbing, we headed for hawk country. Sam seemed to have a sixth sense about hawk nests and soon said "this should be a good hollow for a nest." We asked the farmer for permission and after a half mile hike the Red-tails were circling and screaming. The nest was in a big Red Oak tree. Sam had brought his climbers along and it didn't take me long to reach the nest. I carefully wrapped the two eggs in soft paper and packed them in an old-fashioned ice cream bucket. Sam had brought along a ball of string (which proved to be a collection of untied short strings). As I started to lower the bucket, the short string slipped through my fingers and the bucket bounced from limb to limb all the way down. Sam carefully opened the lid and I yelled down and asked if the eggs were broken. After a few moments, Sam said "I can't even find any shell."

June 14 David (our 17 year old son) and I left early this morning for the 1964 Brooks Bird Club Foray. This year the Foray was held at the Pacahontas County 4-H Camp in the heart of the West Virginia mountains. Each year a week long ecological study of a selected area (usually in W. Virginia) is made. The Foray director is Charles Conrad, a wonderful person and the dedicated leader of the Brooks Bird Club and its many functions. All activities are supposed to lie within a 15-mile diameter circle. Included in the circle this year were such famous places as Spruce Knob (elevation 4860 feet); Gaudineer (a mountain top of 4440 feet elevation and covered with a dense stand of Red Spruce), where we usually find the Swainson's Thrush, Northern Waterthrush, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Winter Wren and Red Crossbill; Blister Pine Swamp; the Sinks of Gandy (where a large stream flows underground and Barn Swallows nest at the entrance). The research committee had proposed that the Canada Warbler be designated the 1964 Foray Bird and all campers were asked to make a special study of this bird and help contribute more knowledge about its nests, habits, etc.

To be continued

THE 1965 STUDENT AWARD OF THE
EASTERN BIRD BANDING ASSOCIATION

This Award is in the amount of \$100.00 made by the Eastern Bird Banding Association in memory of our deceased members.

Applicants for this Award must be either Junior or Senior undergraduates majoring in Zoology or Biology, making at least a B or 3 average, and using bird banding as part of their studies; or graduate students majoring in Ornithology using bird banding as part of their theses. In either case, the applicant's resume should explain how he is using bird banding in his studies and it must be signed by the head of his department.

Applications and resumes must be filed on or before February 1, 1965.

Please mail all applications and resumes to:

Mrs. Stanley S. Dickerson
EBBA Memorial Award Fund
1490 Long Road, Somerville, New Jersey 08876

EBBA News would like to publish any papers the recipient might write as a result of his studies, but this is not a prerequisite.

If the recipient lives close enough to Ocean City, Maryland, to come to the annual meeting of the Eastern Bird Banding Association near the end of April, 1965, EBBA would like to make the presentation at this meeting at Ocean City, Maryland. Otherwise, the Award will be made by mail.