



So far this year we have considered birds as a class, as individuals, as travellers, and as part of ecological complexes. If it should be asked what very important attribute of our feathered friends has been omitted, I would expect a one hundred percent response with the correct answer - SONG.

It is perfectly obvious why banders should be interested in bird song, and fortunately there are stimulating books on this subject. It was sixty years ago that there was published by G. Putnam's Sons the first edition of F. Schuyler Mathews' "Field Book of Wild Birds and Their Music." The author was a man of varied talents for he also authored field books of wild flowers, trees and shrubs, and others; and he illustrated them himself with prints in color and black and white. Furthermore, he often heard birds singing phrases that reminded him of operatic arias, airs from symphonies and concertos, etc., and the text contains many bars and phrases of musical notation.

I'll go along with him in his claim, for instance, that the song of Swainson's thrush sometimes suggests the beginning of the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, but what does that prove? I once heard a western meadowlark taunt me with "Ain't it awful, Mabel!"

In 1929 the New York State Museum published Handbook Number 7, a pamphlet of some 200 pages entitled "Bird Song" by Aretas A. Saunders. This author managed to control any rhapsodic inclinations he might have had, and presented a study more along scientific lines of inquiry. In the first chapter - "Phenomenon of Bird Song" - he analyzes and classifies types of song, acquirement of song by young, etc. Other chapters deal with Purposes of Bird Song, Origin and Evolution, How to Study, and Problems for Further Study. I thought this presentation was good when I first read it nearly forty years ago, and on recent rereading it seems even better.

In 1935 Saunders produced "A Guide to Bird Songs" published by Doubleday, and there is a 1951 edition of this book. He devised a system of notation to indicate types of song readily understandable to anyone who "cannot read a word of music." Perhaps he had discovered that many bird watchers were missing golden opportunities through being unable to identify by sound as well as by sight. Explanation of this system is followed by a key in which songs are classified under

two-note, three-note, trilled, etc. The main part of the book follows the pattern of a field guide except that song notations take the place of plates.

Cambridge University Press has issued a number of monographs in a series called "Experimental Biology," number 12 of which is "Bird Song" by W. H. Thorpe. Shades of Mathews! Bird song has gone completely scientific! But don't let that scare you. Nor the fact that the Preface and the Notes on the Illustrations may sound forbidding. Nor even the fact that as an Englishman the author bases many illustrations on British birds. The chaffinch is frequently mentioned to illustrate points. This is a species as commonly distributed in the British Isles (and all of Europe) as is our song sparrow in North America. Furthermore, it is a species about which the author has gathered much information. However, references to the chaffinch and other foreign species are used to illustrate theories so it really doesn't matter if the reader is unfamiliar with the bird. He will undoubtedly think of a species familiar to him which also illustrates the point at issue.

This is a small book of less than 150 pages, but its contents are solid meat. The chapters deal with call-notes, characteristics of song and sub-song (including whisper song), and development of song in the individual. The final chapter deals with the anatomical basis of sound production and hearing, and compares the hearing range with that of man.

Lest anyone be scared by the thought of a scientific presentation of bird song, the following quotation should give him assurance. "It would...be dishonest to suggest that the biological theories at present available offer a complete explanation for all bird vocalizations. There are many instances of songs which seem to transcend biological requirements and suggest that the bird is actively seeking new auditory and vocal experience - 'playing with sounds,' so to speak - and that this may represent the beginnings of a true artistic activity. Thus the twilight song of the Wood Pewee appears to have no territorial function and is said to be independent of the breeding-cycle, and the day-time song also continues long after the end of the breeding season. Bicknell (1884-5) concludes that the song of late summer and autumn is, in many American song birds, superior to that of the breeding season." Isn't that intriguing!

Both Thorpe's monograph and Saunders' handbook contain extensive bibliographies. Such lists often furnish one with references along lines in which he has a special interest.

The July 1964 issue of Bird Banding presents a review of still another book on the subject: "A Study of Bird Song" by Edward A. Armstrong, 1963, Oxford University Press. I have not seen this book yet, but the chapter headings as indicated in the review suggest a similar coverage to that of Thorpe's book. Both books are illustrated

by spectrographs of bird vocalizations. The more recent one contains photographs of birds in the act of singing. It has more than twice as many pages as Thorpe's monograph, and costs nearly three times as much.

I intend to read Armstrong's publication when I can get hold of it, and see whether to give the palm to Oxford or Cambridge.

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A Bird Bander's Diary

Sept.-Oct.



September 17 ... Walter Bigger has written me glowing accounts about some of their fabulous days at Island Beach. We had one of those days here at our Operation Recovery station at Red Creek Campgrounds today. This place is unique, not only because of its altitude, but also because of its extreme weather contrasts. Some days are clear and beautiful, and the 9 mountain ranges to the east can be seen with the naked eye. The bad days are when the whole mountain is enveloped in the clouds and visibility is often only 50 yards. This can last for days and a new-comer to the area can be quite discouraged. Winds are also a factor. I well recall our first attempt at banding (1958) on this mountain top. Wind velocity reached at least 75 miles per hour and we would walk 50 feet back from the edge for fear of being blown over the rocky cliffs. EBBA member Charles Handley (of the W. Va. Conservation Dept.) was on this first banding trial.

To get back to banding - the day started out rather warm (about 60 degrees), there were no clouds (except for a high haze) and there was a very light west wind. I had driven to the area last night and put up two nets after dark at the place we call the rim (and caught a Woodcock while doing it.) George Hall had left the poles in place when he left after 10 days of banding the first part of September, and it was easy to put up the nets. Soon after daylight, John Morgan (a college student from Charleroi, Pa. who had arrived during the night) and I walked the 200 yards to the rim. An Ovenbird, Black-th. Blue Warbler and one Rose-breasted Grosbeak were in the nets. A few birds were coming up the ravine, but nothing unusual and by 7:20 I was wondering if the expected migration was going to develop (I even thought of putting up some more nets.) At 7:30 (DST) the deluge started. We took a few birds out of the first net and moved