MAKING AND USING SHORE BIRD SILHOUETTE DECOYS

By Robert P. Yunick

After reading Raymond H. Bubb's article entitled, "Wooden Shore Bird Decoys," (EBBA News, 26(4), 158(1963)) over a year ago, I became intrigued by his descriptions of how birds came to his decoys and were netted for banding. Surely, banding these long-ranging migrants could be a most interesting endeavor, particularly since it would be a challenge to one's ingenuity to capture these birds in number. During the winter of 1963-1964, I turned my attention to making decoys for use in the spring.

It seemed that shore bird decoying would be no different from water-fowl decoying, namely that large sets of decoys would be most effective. My previous experience with making decoys had shown that carving was a tedious process and not suited for making large quantities of decoys quickly. Initial attempts at casting decoys in plaster had a number of disadvantages, one of which was the decoy's heavy weight. Forming paper maché bodies in these molds was equally disappointing. One might ask why a soft wood like balsa was not used? Actually the forms for the molds were carved from balsa wood, but despite the wood's softness, considerable time was needed to make a smooth form that was ready for painting. The more important objection was price. A 2X6X36-inch piece of balsa wood cost $3.60 at a local hobby shop.

After some thinking about waterfowl decoys and realizing that geese tend to be exceedingly shy and wary and yet are often successfully attracted to large and sometimes very crude silhouette decoys, it seemed logical to expect that silhouette decoys should therefore be effective on gregarious, unsuspecting shore birds. It appeared also that silhouette decoys would be easy to make. Indeed, this was the case. Once the proper silhouettes were drawn and cut out to serve as tracing guides, the time required to trace the decoys, cut the blanks on a band saw, and then dress the rough edges with a file was less than five minutes per blank.

Figures I and II show some of the silhouettes that were used. The killdeer silhouette is slightly over-sized in order to double as a plover form. All the silhouettes have cuts about one-quarter of an inch deep in the lower belly. These slits are used for mounting the decoys on a "leg." The "leg" can be a wooden dowel about 6-12 inches long and one-quarter or one-eighth of an inch in diameter, or a metal support. The length depends on how deep one has to set the decoys to get support. On firm sand, a short "leg" is satisfactory, but in loose mud a deep set is needed to keep the decoys upright. When not firmly set, the decoys tend to lean with the wind. I prefer to use rectangular copper wire measuring one-sixteenth of an inch thick and one-quarter of an inch wide. In any case, the "leg" is cut with a slit the thickness of the decoy and the decoy with a slit matching the thickness of the "leg."

Then the slit in the decoy is matched with the slit in the "leg" and the assembly is pressed into the ground to the desired height.

The type of material from which these blanks are made can be varied according to cost and availability. Preferrably it should be weather-proof, durable, thin, and light in weight. My own blanks were cut from one-sixteenth of an inch Bakelite type impregnated panels that were salvaged from where I work. This material is very similar to the type of laminate from which printed circuits are made. To the best of my knowledge, this material is not commercially available in the form needed to make decoy blanks. However, an equally effective material is one-eighth of an inch tempered Masonite board which is available at almost all lumber yards very inexpensively. Other possibilities are rigid aluminum, or other metals or alloys, one-quarter of an inch thick plywood, or whatever suitable material is available. I would recommend the Masonite board, because of its availability and cost, about 10-12 cents/ sq. ft. If one makes decoys from Masonite or plywood and anticipates that the decoys will get soaking wet in use, the blanks should be coated with an exterior-grade varnish before painting. Prior to painting, the varnished blank should be roughened with sandpaper to help the paint adhere better.

The success in painting the decoys depends on the choice of paint. Any paint, enamel or lacquer that gives the slightest hint of gloss should be avoided, because a slanting morning or evening sun will make the decoys glare, and this is undesireable. Under such circumstances, the decoys look more like scarecrows than anything else. I used various enamels and even artist's oil paints before finding that none was worthwhile. Attempts at deglossing these decoys by rubbing with steel fur or fine-grit sandpaper were disappointing. Finally an excellent decoy paint was found. The paint is sold as "Dull Decoy Paint" for duck and goose decoys and is available through the mail from Herter's, Inc., Waseca, Minnesota. This paint is especially dull. It dries almost immediately, but takes several hours, preferrably overnight, to thoroughly cure. It comes in two kinds--one for absorptive surfaces like wood, and a second kind for non-porous surfaces such as plastic and metal. The latter variety is recommended. It comes in a wide selection of "bird shades," however, with black, white, a brown, and a yellow, one can do wonders. The paints can be tinted with slight amounts of artist's oils without harm. The paint is available in one-, four-, eight-, 16-, and 32-ounce quantities. Four ounces handles a very large number of decoys and costs 55 cents.

Painting the decoy blanks takes long hours if one wants realistic decoys. I attempted to make my birds as realistic as possible and spent from 15 to 60 minutes apiece doing so. I am not sure that this is necessary. Suggestive painting would be far more rapid to do and most likely as effective. Such birds as killdeer were easy to do, but the greater yellowlegs required utmost patience. Using good bird plates

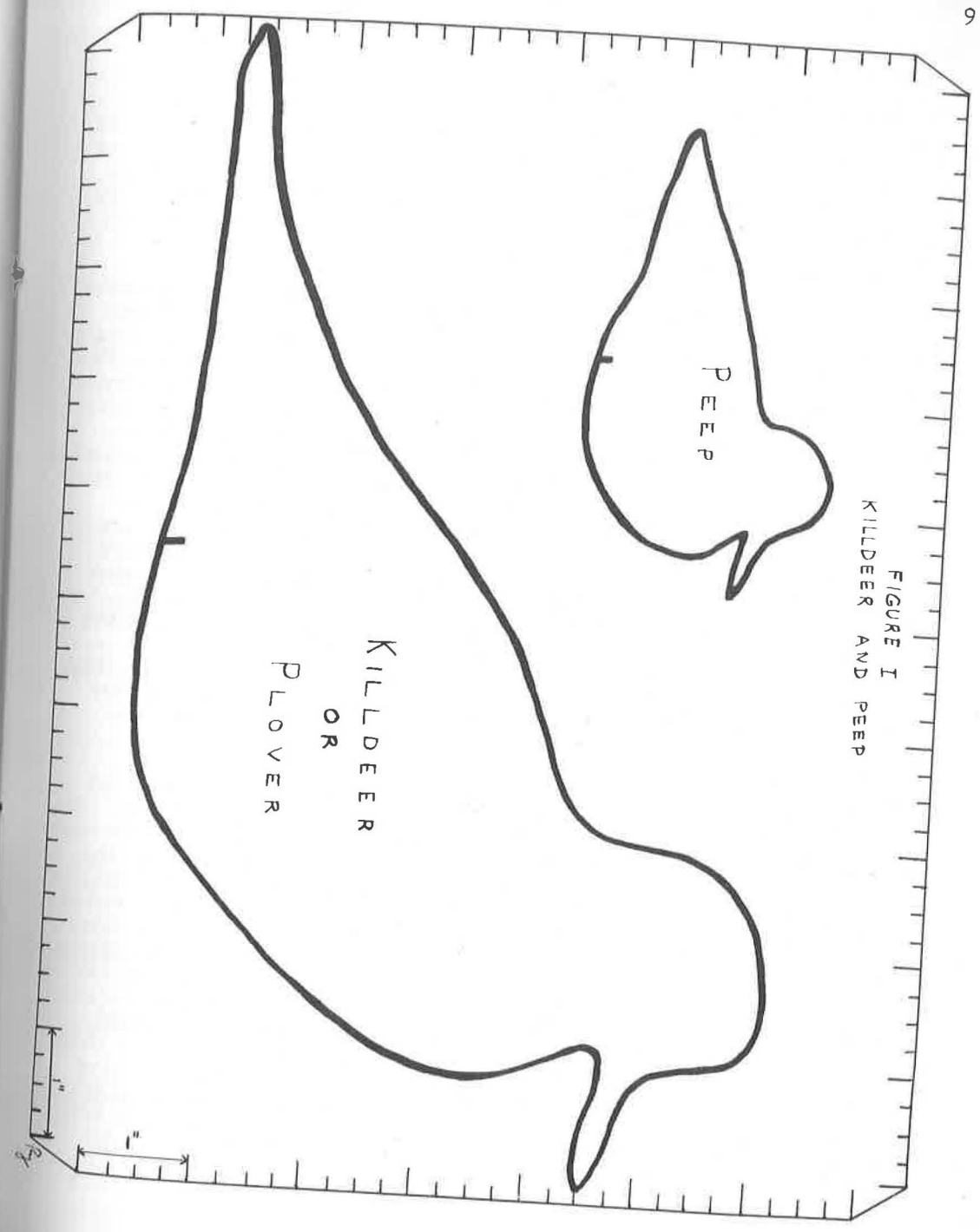

FIGURE I
KILLDEER AND PEEP

like those of Fuertes set before me on the bench as I painted, I learned what steps were necessary to get the desired end result. Then I set up an assembly line and in one evening might paint nothing but bellies. The following evenings the backs would be painted. Then on subsequent nights, the proper shading, speckling, trimming or whatever would be done. At the completion of these many evenings of engrossing labor, it was reward enough just to see these many finished forms lying before me drying on the workbench. At least I now had an excuse to put away the numerous brushes, rags, paints, tints, solvents, etc., and clean up the mess. All the while I was plagued by the question of whether this had been really worth it - would these things work?

On May 20, 1964, I made my first try on a local mud flat. Fourteen least sandpipers fell to the nets that evening. However, I could not tell whether the decoys had played any substantial part in the capture of those birds. It seemed that maybe they had. On the evening of the 22nd, 15 birds were banded and on the morning of the 23rd, 11. On the evening of the 26th eight more shore birds were banded. In all these instances I was still not sure that the decoys aided materially in the netting. Finally on the evening of May 28, 1964, I was convinced. A most memorable thing happened. I arrived at the flat late, about 7:00 p.m. Since most of the shore bird flight had passed, I was very surprised to see the grouping of birds that was present. The killdeer and semipal plovers stood out quickly. At one small pool was a lone yellowlegs. Darting about the various puddles and amid the nearby vegetation were a number of peeps. Off to one side was a group of birds doing considerable splashing as they bathed. Through the 10X50 binocular my eyes feasted on three dunlins - my first in spring plumage. All told probably over 40 or 50 shore birds were active on the flat. In the midst of all this were three decoys from two days previous. When I had picked up after dark on the 26th, I had missed these three. Soon they were to score their mark.

In a minute the flock flushed with much calling as I plodded out onto the soggy flat to put up nets. It was a cool, breezy evening. The breeze billowed the nets as I unfurled, and it looked like the nets would take little due either to scaring the birds with movement in the wind, or due to having no loose bag to hold the birds should they hit the net. I worked quickly, because the flock flew nervously here and there overhead and looked like it might depart any second. The air was full of melodic call notes. The first net was strung past the three decoys. Occasionally I glanced up to keep track of the flock. When I finished placing the second net and was unfurling the third, the sound of the flock suddenly came low and from in back of me. I turned quickly and stood amazed. About 60 yards away the flock was winging its way across the flat about three feet off the ground. Only 15 yards away from me were the three decoys near the net. The birds came working their way slowly against the stiff breeze. I simply could not believe that they would fly into that billowed net set so obviously in the open. Directly toward the

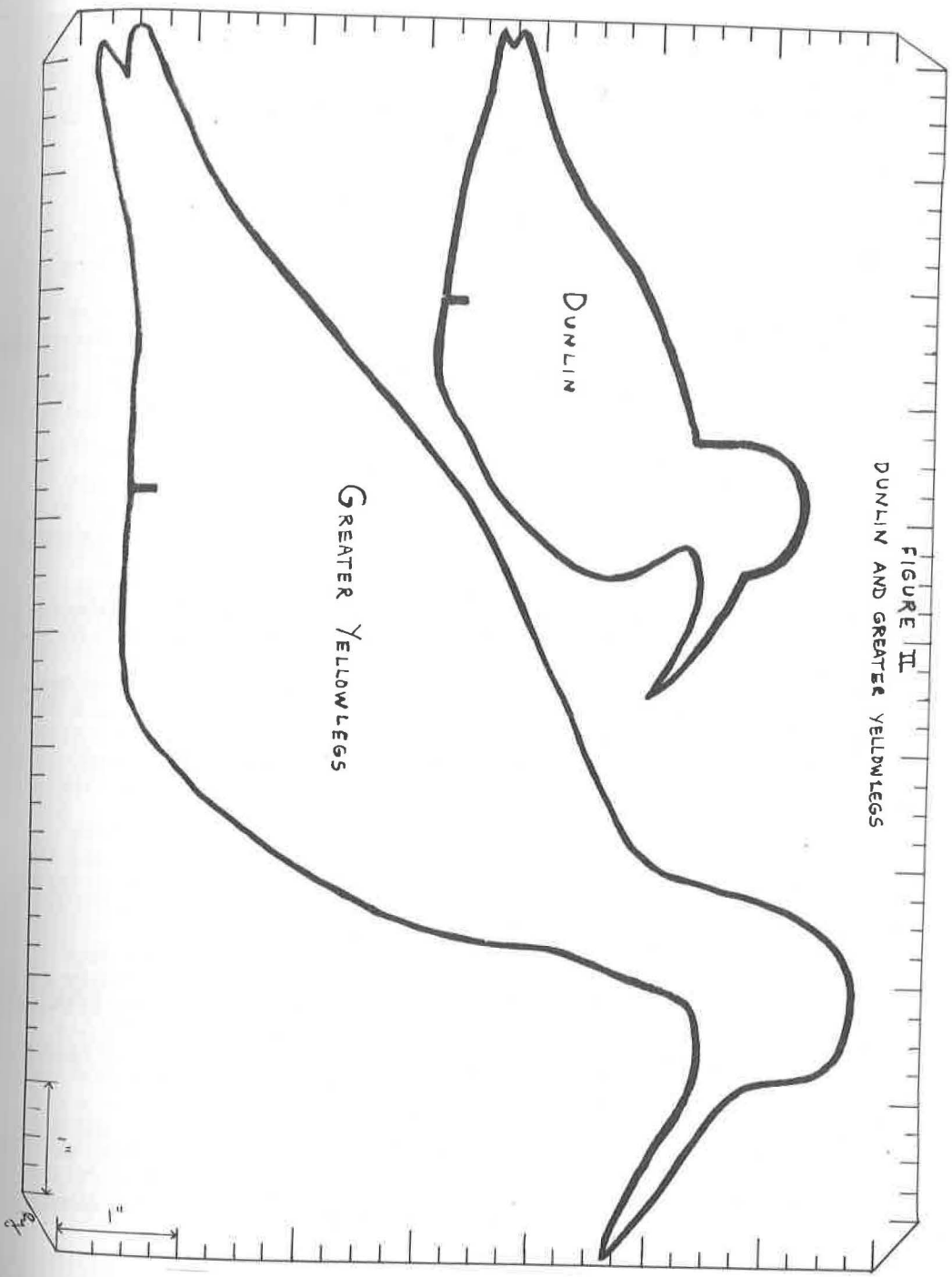

FIGURE II
DUNLIN AND GREATER YELLOWLEGS

decoys they came. Suddenly it happened. The air was full of squeals of alarm as the lead birds fell to the net. Quickly the rear guard veered with the wind and managed to escape. About 20 sqealing, thrashing forms hung in the net. I dropped the third net and dashed to the car for the holding cage. The birds were gathered. By the time I unfurled the third net and was back at the car and had the bands ready, the rest of the flock settled in from the windward side where no net had yet been strung. If only I had had the gathering cage capacity to hold those additional birds, I could have walked them into the net. Since I already had my hands full, I had to take care of what I had. Shorthly the flock flew from the flat to another flat about 300 yards away. As I was finishing banding what I had, I asked two boys who had been watching me band to go to the other pool and flush the birds with the hope that they would be decoyed to the three nets where more decoys had been placed. The youngsters gladly obliged. Shortly the birds came by, circled, set their wings and encountered the net directly over the decoy grouping. By darkness I had banded 30 shore birds of five species and had three repeats. Included in the banding was one of the dunlins. I was now convinced that the time spent on those decoys had been worth every bit of the effort.

Two other instances regarding the effectiveness of these decoys stand out in my mind. On August 22, 1964, I was banding at Watervliet Reservoir near Schenectady. I had nets strung along a brushy shore, across a back-water and along a cattail bar. I had out mainly killdeer decoys hoping to lure back a snipe that had flushed from the area the evening before when I had set out my nets. The water in the reservoir was not yet low enough to attract large numbers of shore birds and very few were present. Two companions and I concealed ourselves under a willow to keep out of the drizzle and not scare the birds. From high up and perhaps 200 yards away came the piercing flight call of a killdeer. We became quiet and motionless waiting to test the decoys. The call came closer and closer, but still high in the sky. It sounded as though the bird were passing high directly overhead. The calling stopped and we waited. I felt disappointed, for I thought that had the bird been fooled by the decoys, it would have approached at a much lower altitude. Then from the direction of the decoys came a muffled squealing. I peeped out and there hung a killdeer in the net directly over the decoy set.

The other instance involved not a shore bird, rather a bird that commands a great deal of my ornithological respect - a falcon, namely a merlin. The experience happened at Island Beach on September 29, 1964. It was a dull grey day and the banding not so good due to the rain--we were having our third straight day of it. At the end of lane A-4, where I banded, I had one shore net set with decoys. The decoys did their job, but the abrupt shore, troublesome tides and use of only one net made the situation almost hopeless. About 200 yards away was a point of land and a shallow extensive flat that would have produced many shore birds, but it was too far to go to care for a second string of nets should a flight develop on the island. While I was at Island Beach, merlins were common

Figure III

Aerial View of Net Setting For Open Flats

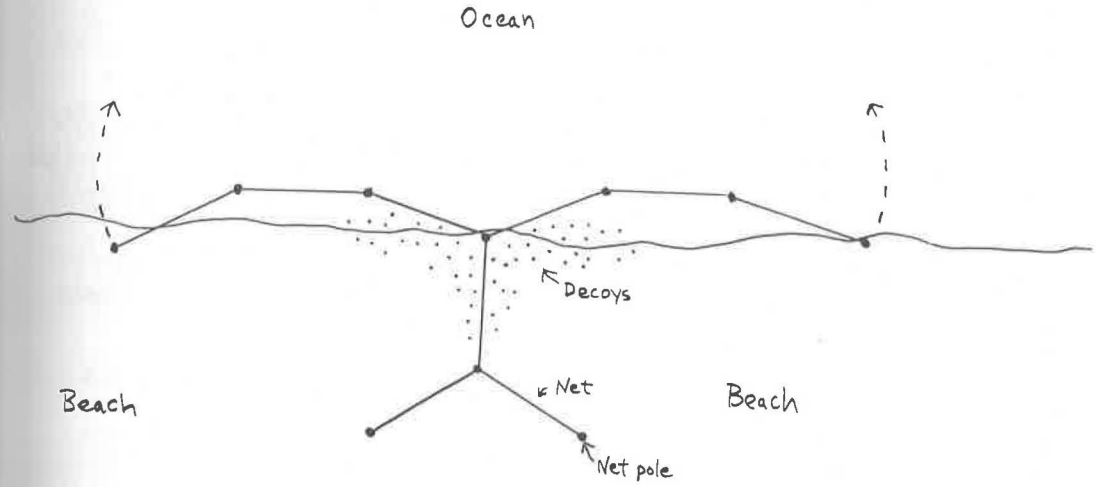

Figure IV

Aerial View of Net Setting For Open Beach

in numbers varying with the migrational flights. At most, three or four were seen in the air at once. Most all these birds frequented the body of the island and harassed the numerous song birds present. Occasionally a merlin would perch nearby and inspect one's net lane. From time to time, low-flying merlins or those attracted to birds in the nets would get caught. However, on September 29th when I found a female merlin lying in the bottom shelf of my shore net tangled amid the beach vegetation less than two feet from a killdeer decoy, I could not explain the bird's presence by any other than its attraction to that silhouette. Fooling shore birds was one thing, but fooling a falcon was something else.

The experience at Island Beach with the decoys reinforced some of my earlier experience regarding the setting of nets for shore birds. The use of decoys does not guarantee success. One must adopt a netting pattern suited to the particular conditions. For those who band shore birds at night, the most important factor is locating the birds' flight path whether it be the surf's edge, a bay shore or a mud bar. Once a good flight path is located, a net, or several nets, set perpendicularly to the path is most advantageous. However, during the day, this same technique may fail miserably depending on local conditions. Sometimes birds will fly into a visible net and at other times they shy away from it. One of the most effective sets that I have found for open flats is illustrated in Figure III. The nets are set in a "U" or a cup-shape. The number of 12- or 18-meter nets used depends on the size of the flat. For a small flat or puddle, two nets forming a "V" are satisfactory. For larger flats, usually five nets suffice. The opening of the cup depends on the size of the flat and the number of people involved. The opening should be as large as possible. The object is to decoy the birds onto the flat at the cup opening, and then slowly walk toward the birds, keeping them scurring toward the net. All the birds must be herded as a group and kept facing the net. If some birds stray to the side, the whole flock may follow and be lost. A second or third person is very helpful at this point. When the birds are close to the net, they are flushed by hand-clapping or shouting. If the herding was properly done, the birds will have been close enough to the net so as not to have been able to mount over the net at the time of flushing. If one uses a straight line of nets, the birds invariable escape by flushing and flying parallel to the net. The cup-shape of the net usually prevents this "leaking." In a confined setting, some birds do not settle readily. Both species of yellowlegs are difficult in this respect. I have had them circle several times only to depart without settling. The larger settings help bring these species to the decoys.

I have not tried a cup-shaped setting on an open ocean beach, but it seems that such a setting should work. In such a case, a setting opening to the birds' path of flight along the beach seems adviseable. The set can be doubled to an open-end figure eight as in Figure IV to accommodate birds in both directions. The shifting of the outer nets can adjust for tide changes.

Most banders fail to make use of the allurement of decoys. One added sidelight is the use of decoys on other species. Many a bander is familiar with the great caution shown by the first evening grosbeak when alighting on a feeder tray or entering a trap. The piling in that usually follows is also a familiar sight. Well, why not hasten the piling in process with a decoy or two in the trap? Presently, 18 male evening grosbeak silhouettes are waiting for some grosbeaks to arrive. So far this has not been a "finch winter." In preparation are some goldfinch silhouettes.

This one year's trial-and-error use of shore bird decoys has been most satisfying. The take for the year with most of the banding done in the spring and very little done in the fall was 123 birds of nine species including the following: semipalmated plover, killdeer, common snipe, spotted sandpiper, solitary sandpiper, lesser yellowlegs, least sandpiper, dunlin and semipalmated sandpiper.

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HAND-REARED ROBIN RETURNS TO PLACE OF RELEASE

By Leonard J. Bradley

Sooner or later, anyone who operates a banding station will be asked to band a hand-reared bird which is about to be released. Here at Audubon Center we band a number each year provided that they are fully fledged and ready to fly. We do this chiefly for the sake of good public relations, even though we know that the chances of a hand-reared bird, particularly a migratory bird surviving in the wild is slim indeed. This year we have proof that it can happen.

One of my returns was an adult robin, No. 612-25242, banded June 6, 1963, as an immature, hand-reared bird. It was raised from a fledgling at Katonah, New York, but was banded and released at the Audubon Center of Connecticut, Greenwich, Conn., some 15 miles from Katonah. It was retaken at the Audubon Center on June 19, 1964.

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Looking Forward to EBBA Annual Meeting
Ocean City, Maryland, April 23, 24 & 25, 1965