

## TAME BIRDS IN A DECOY TRAP

By Harold E. Burt

Since October, 1963 I have been collaborating in a program of banding "blackbirds" at a decoy trap.\* Our trap is of conventional design, made of chicken wire 80' x 25' x 7'.

Extending lengthwise of the center of the top is the usual "ladder" of 2" x 4" mesh, through which the birds can drop with wings folded. At one corner is the sliding door to the gathering cage and a large funnel converges on this door. The birds are driven the length of the trap and around into the funnel. Doors for the operator to enter and leave are appropriately located. Cracked corn, water and 20 or more decoys attract the birds.

I first noticed the unusual behavior one afternoon when we had neglected to put food in the trap the previous night. When I went in and scattered corn in the usual feeding area, cowbirds, redwings and grackles were all around my feet just like domestic poultry at feeding time. Practically no starlings were in the trap during the time covered by this report. A few days later I deliberately got them hungry and then sat down in the trap with some corn scattered beside me and on me. The attached photographs document the result.



\*The project is under the general supervision of Maurice Giltz. I am also indebted to Joseph Halusky for corroborating some of the experiences reported and for helping with the photography.

## BURTT - Tame Birds in a Decoy Trap



I was able to photograph birds perched on my own feet and legs and another party photographed me doing this. If corn was held in the palm of my hand some birds would perch on the finger tips to eat. I have color slides of this. I could not reach out and grasp a bird -- they moved away a foot or two. However I could move my hand slowly till quite close and then make a quick successful grab. Cowbirds were most conspicuous in this tame behavior but some redwings and grackles did likewise. An occasional mourning dove came quite close.

The explanation is straightforward. The hunger drive was sufficiently strong to offset the usual fear/flight drive. This situation is not unique. Anecdotes have been reported of wild animals during a food shortage coming around human areas which they ordinarily avoided. However this is the first time I had observed this phenomenon with birds in many years of banding. Incidentally, the other man who was banding at the trap could evoke the same response from the birds.

Another kind of behavior was observed. If the birds were hungry and I entered the trap without any food they nevertheless came toward me. On occasion when I was outside the door and working the combination lock a number of birds came up to the door. I entered and walked about 15 feet to set the sliding door to the gathering cage and when I looked around they were right at my heels. This behavior did not appear when they were satiated (the usual situation) and at my entrance they hopped or flew away an appreciable distance. Obviously they had formed an association between me and food. This gets into the field of learning rather than the mere

conflict or preponderance of drives. Of course people have taught an individual wild bird to come and feed from the hand but the performance of the whole assembly was more impressive.

In a learning situation an animal ordinarily needs several experiences in order to build up an association of the type in question. It is doubtful that a bird seeing a man scatter food in the trap just once would form the association. But it is probable that some of our birds did have several experiences. Whenever I chased them down the funnel to the gathering cage some reached the end and flew back past me in spite of vigorous arm waving and raucous noises. Anyway a number were always left in the trap to serve as decoys. So conceivably a given bird may have remained in the trap a week or more although this cannot be documented. However many of the birds we banded did enter the trap again (repeats). Some of them did it several times. I have seen a bird released at the banding table fly directly to the ladder and back in within 30 seconds.

Thus it is probable that an appreciable number of the birds observed a man scattering corn in the trap enough times to form the association. So when hungry these birds would approach me. The species involved are somewhat social and often do things together. So when the experienced nucleus, under the food drive, came toward me their companions might do likewise.

In summary, cowbirds, redwings and grackles in a decoy trap when hungry would approach a person who sat down in the trap with corn around him and perch on his feet and legs. Evidently the hunger drive overcame the fear/flight drive. But it was not entirely the attraction of the food as such. Some birds formed an association between the operator and food. Some individuals presumably were in the trap for several days and had enough experiences of seeing a man scatter food to form this association.

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#### RADIO PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS WANTED

Radio Station WJAM, Altoona, Pennsylvania, now has a 15 minute radio program running 5 days a week called "Birds". EBBA member W. J. Moughemer has given several talks on it and would like to hear from any member who has suggestions, addresses where materials are supplied by various states, state check lists, etc.

Send your ideas to: W. J. Moughemer, Lower Brush Mt., RD #2,  
Holidaysburg, Pennsylvania