

July-August

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
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July 2 A few Cicada (17 year locust) still singing, but the worst is over. This phenomenon is something to see. Literally millions of these insects suddenly emerge from the ground in June every 17 years. As many as 20,000 have been known to emerge from beneath one tree. I counted 12 of their pupal cases on one maple leaf. Incessant singing by the males makes bird study impossible as the roar is deafening. In wooded areas the air was clouded with them as they flew from tree to tree. On heavily traveled highways, their smashed bodies covered the roads. On the river there were rafts of drowned locusts as much as a mile long. But it was a banner year for many wild animals and birds as it meant food. Birds the size of Bluebirds and larger had a heyday. Our young Purple Martins were the fattest I have ever known and many bands could not be completely closed (for fear of cutting off circulation). A larger band would be much too big as soon as the baby fat was gone.

July 5 Still banding a few Red-winged Blackbird nestlings. I decided this year to allot some time for this worthy project. Practically 95% of the Red-wings in this area nest in either meadows or pasture fields. This morning I checked a small cattail swamp for nests. Although Red-wings were very active in a field only a few yards away, there were absolutely no nests in the swamp. While walking through this small swamp I heard a sharp "keek" note given by some bird. I whistled a similar note and it answered back. This continued for perhaps 5 minutes, but I never did get a glimpse of the bird. It was probably a rail although no nests of any rail have ever been found in our area to my knowledge. It could have been the crippled Sora Rail that I had released nearby just 2 months ago. A local boy had found this rail along a highway near his place. They had no telephone, but the lad knew I would be checking on the Upland Plovers (that nest on their farm) and had it in a small wire cage for me to see. He had kept it alive by feeding it spaghetti, rice crispies, crackers and fishworms. The rail seemed quite lively (but did not fly) so we released it in a small stream near their house.

July 18 Received a hurry up call by phone this evening from Bill Haver. Bill said the heavy rain and wind storm this afternoon had collapsed his Barn Owl barrel and the young were on the ground. I had tied the barrel up in a large maple tree near Bill's house during the winter of 1956-1957. I knew the barrel was in bad shape as I had banded the five young just 2 weeks ago. Some of the staves were already gone and the young could be seen from the ground - much to the enjoyment of the local children. We could locate only 4 of the young, and one of these

was breathing hard and near death - probably from being hit on the head by a falling barrel stave. Another barrel was soon in place and the young owls were placed inside. The parents were back tonight, and the young were fed on schedule.

Over 10 years ago I read in the Pa. Game News about putting up 50-gallon wooden barrels with 5" entrance holes near the top for Barn Owls. The first 2 barrels were put up here on the farm during the winter of 1954-55. They were fastened (with wire) about 25 feet up in suitable large trees on opposite sides of the farm. The barrels were erected upright and covered with a roof to keep out the snow and rain.

Barn Owls seem to regulate their families to correspond with high and low mouse populations. Mice populations were high and both barrels were occupied that first spring (1955). One barrel contained 7 young and the other 6 young owls. I was really impressed by the large number of mice consumed by young Barn Owls. When the barrel containing the 7 young was checked (after they left), it was found to be over $\frac{1}{2}$ full of ejected pellets (this would be more than 25 gallons). The pellets observed contained the skull, bones and fur of field mice. No bird feathers or rabbit fur could be found. I have read where a single pair of Barn Owls and their young will consume more than 150 mice in a single day (which sounds fantastic to me).

Because of its habits - the silent shadowy flight and weird cries - the Barn Owl is often regarded with superstitious fear. Ever since I can remember, these owls have nested on our farm. There were many times when I was a mere lad that I fairly "shook in my shoes" when a Barn Owl would dart at me and give one of those hideous screams just as it passed my head. They nested in a deep hollow cavity in the top of a giant White Oak not far from our house. I then had a collection of bird eggs - obtained by removing one egg from a nest of each species found. I was determined to get a Barn Owl egg and have since considered myself lucky to be alive when I think of the risks involved to get that egg for my collection. Without telling anyone of my intentions, I climbed to the top of that 80 foot nest tree. Both owls were at the foot of the 12 foot cavity and left as I was climbing up. The top, although fairly rotten, held me and I slowly lowered myself down to the eggs. After studying them for a while, I took a nice clean one and then found that I could not climb back out. I was in a real predicament now and almost became frantic until I remembered reading that no situation is hopeless. By using a penknife, I was able to cut little notches for steps and finally reached the top.

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