

Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie



For many years I have been devoted to the theory that bird banding is a scientific pursuit admirably suited for the woman who is keeping house and raising a family. The only proviso is that such a woman be living in a location where birds are found. This worked out most satisfactorily for me. I have wondered if I hold the record for banding a bird while nursing a new-born babe.

Although my life has been greatly enriched through banding, my results fade into insignificance compared with those of my long-time friend, Margaret Morse Nice. To be sure, I have probably banded thousands more birds than she, but I'm sure she is the living example of what Earl Baysinger wishes we all might be. She went in for intensity not quantity, achieved an international reputation, and wrote the classic example of the life history of a bird.

When I first entered into correspondence with Mrs. Nice, she was living in Oklahoma, where she managed to raise four daughters and publish "The Birds of Oklahoma," not to mention numerous articles in various periodicals. Then her husband's work took the family to Columbus, Ohio. Undoubtedly there are females who would have claimed all was lost, but not Margaret Nice. She surveyed the area and found close to her home an uncultivated area of some fifty acres along the Olentangy River. The common species there, as one might guess, was the song sparrow. She probably said to herself, "All right, let's see what I can do with this species."

What she did was to produce a definitive life history of Melospiza melodia, and to establish a standard of life history procedure. The results were first published by the Linnaean Society of New York in 1937 and 1943. The two volumes have recently been reprinted by Dover Publications (TL219 and TL220), each costing \$1.75. The overall title is "Studies in the Life History of the Song Sparrow." Volume I is called "A Population Study of the Song Sparrow," and Volume II is called "The Behavior of the Song Sparrow and Other Passerines." The "other passerines" are mentioned by way of comparison. In 1939 Macmillan published a popularization of the material in this study in hard covers entitled "The Watcher at the Nest."

The procedure during some eight years of observations was to spend long hours and days in the area which she named Interpont. By using colored bands as well as Fish and Wildlife bands, Mrs. Nice was able to recognize any song sparrow at sight. When boys with firearms threatened to interfere with the song sparrow population, she procured a commission as Special Game Protector of the State of Ohio, and used her badge along with pep talks and persuasion to such effect that she was no longer bothered. As much as possible she let nature take its course, neither removing cowbird eggs nor killing natural enemies.

She took weights and measurements throughout the day and year. She found there were transients, summer residents, winter residents, and plain residents among this one species, and that the different categories had various behavior patterns. A number of chapters deal with her survey and study of territorial procedure.

Do you banders know that she claims sex can usually be distinguished by wing measurement? or that whether males are adult or young can be told in the fall from the shape of the tail feathers? "Measurement of the wing has been used as an aid in determining sex, the great majority of males having wings 65 to 69 mm. in length, the majority of females 59 to 63 mm."

"The migratory impulse is believed to be latent in all the song sparrows, functioning normally in the majority of the birds, lying dormant in most of the others, but perhaps capable of stimulation or inhibition in a few by weather conditions in October."

"The spring migration normally shows two main flights: an early migration of breeding males in late February or early March, and the main flight of breeding males and females, and also transients the middle of March. The early migration is absolutely dependent on a warm wave the last of February or the first of March, but the main migration is only relatively dependent on a rise in temperature. Severe cold waves stop migration short."

These quotes interested me because we used to see exactly these situations near our home, but never were able to gather enough data to proclaim it.

Chapter IX is called "The Relations Between the Sexes." The author claims these facts as listed in the summary. The role of the male is that of guardian of his territory, mate, nest, and young, and he dominates the female by a species of attack herein called 'pouncing.' Mates are normally faithful to each other through one nesting season, but there were less than 4 per cent of possible matings in which they remated a second year. "Females do not appear to prefer the larger, handsomer, stronger males, nor do they choose the best equipped territories."

The summary at the end of Volume I states that the study "was undertaken on a common bird, by one individual with no institutional support (save for library facilities) and no apparatus except that in use at any well-equipped banding station. The present volume is a report of a portion of the scientific findings from eight years of study on this particular species. The study could well have been pursued for many more years, since experimental techniques had hardly been started upon. Other common species should prove equally rewarding." The italics are Mrs. Nice's. How right she is!

In Volume II the author describes in detail how she hand raised several broods of song sparrows. Anyone confronted with the care of a nestling can get valuable advice on care and feeding from these pages. Other chapters consider various types of bird behavior.

Chapter X, dealing with "Song in Female Birds" interested me particularly. I remember the time my husband wrote an item about the singing of a female house wren, and the editor wouldn't accept it for publication because female birds don't sing. Myself, I have a paper on cardinals, accepted by an editor, but lying dormant in the editorial drawer, which describes the singing of the female cardinal.

By the time she wrote the second volume, Mrs. Nice had visited with or consulted many leading ornithologists and authorities on animal behavior, even spending a month with Konrad Lorenz and family in Austria (Lorenz is a top authority on bird behavior, and I can't wait to give you a dose of his adventures.)

Each of these two volumes dealing with the Life History of the Song Sparrow contains a tremendous bibliography. If only one might escape from the inexorable time machine to a South Sea Island with a mere quarter of the titles mentioned, and slip back into time tomorrow fortified by tremendous wisdom!

This time there is not going to be any new book mentioned. There are other worthwhile life histories which will get their honorable mention some day. But Margaret Nice's life history studies, even though twenty or more years old, contain so much that is new for all of us that it qualifies for both old and new.

313 Sharp Avenue, Glenolden, Pennsylvania 19036

