

HAND-CAPTURE OF ROOSTING BIRDS FOR BANDING

By Herbert W. Kale II

Since there is so little published data pertaining to the roosting habits of most species of birds the following observations made during a visit to the Dry Tortugas might be of interest and perhaps stimulate further research on the subject. From 8 May to 13 May, 1965, I participated in the Sooty and Noddy Tern banding program on Bush Key conducted by the Florida Audubon Society, Florida State Museum, and the Everglades National Park under the leadership of Dr. William B. Robertson, Jr., ENP biologist. Part of the day and each night was spent on Garden Key, the site of Fort Jefferson.

The Dry Tortugas are dry sandy islands located approximately 70 miles due west of Key West, Florida, and are the first landfall between the Caribbean Islands to the south and the continental U. S. During migrations most birds passing over or near the Tortugas do not stop, possibly because these keys are relatively barren of food and fresh water. Nevertheless, some birds in good physical condition land for brief periods ranging from a few minutes to several hours, and they fly on. During periods of adverse weather however, large numbers of birds are forced to land. Many of these birds are in weakened condition. Unless a bird arrives on these keys in good health with sufficient energy reserves for further flight, it is doubtful that it will ever leave except perhaps as a meal in the stomach of a predator--Sparrow Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, or Cattle Egret. Many of the Cattle Egrets also succumb to starvation, although some of them probably survive by eating the weakened song birds (See Cunningham, 1965, Auk 82:502-503) or the nestling Sooty and Noddy Terns on Bush Key.

Since there is so little vegetation on Garden Key, I thought that perhaps it might be possible to find some of these migrants sleeping in the few shrubs and trees scattered within the confines of the huge brick fort. For an hour or so on three different nights a search was made with a flashlight among the shrubs and lower branches of the taller trees. Bill Robertson and Sievert Rohwer accompanied me one night. Usually, the first hint that a bird was present was the sighting of fresh white fecal matter on leaves beneath the bird. When the bird was sighted an attempt was made to identify it without disturbance, then it was quickly captured by hand. Positive identification was made and the bird placed in a holding cage for banding and release the next morning.

Healthy birds were usually alert and would stare at the light and fly off into the darkness at the first observable movement or shadow in front of the light. Weakened birds appeared to sleep much more soundly and often kept their heads under the scapulars while the light was on them. Some of these birds appeared to be shivering.

Birds picked from their sleeping perches in this manner are listed in Table 1. A Gray Kingbird was found sleeping in a tree about 15 feet above the ground, but it flew away as Rohwer began to climb the tree. Although we suspected that there were at least 100 birds present on Garden Key, the majority of these must have roosted in the taller trees within the fort or in the shrubbery outside the walls, since so few individuals were found in the low shrubbery on the parade ground. Some birds possibly slept in the numerous crevices and crannies of the old brick fort, and a few individuals may have roosted in the low vegetation growing on the sand-covered terreplein atop the fort.

Table 1. Roosting birds captured by hand within Fort Jefferson, Garden Key, Dry Tortugas, May, 1965.

Species	Roosting Site	Height	Condition of bird
Redstart ♀	Tree	6 ft.	Good
Redstart ♀	Vine	7 ft.	Weak
Cape May Warbler ♀	Shrub	3 ft.	Weak
Palm Warbler	Tree	6 ft.	Weak
Yellowthroat ♀	Shrub	3 ft.	Good
Ovenbird	Shrub	2 ft.	Good
Ovenbird*	Shrub	4 ft.	Good
Black-throated Blue Warbler ♀	Shrub	4 ft.	Weak

* This bird, presumably the same one, was frightened off its perch the first night, but was back on the same perch the following night.

In April, 1966, Drs. Glen Woolfenden and William Jennings found a Tree Swallow in weakened condition asleep on the floor of a second story casemate. They also captured a Mourning Dove asleep in a small tree within the fort (this last species is one of the few resident breeding birds).

This method of capturing birds for banding purposes possesses the excitement and anticipation of a treasure hunt, but may not be very practical in areas where the number of potential roosting sites are unlimited. However, within the confines of ones own backyard or immediate neighborhood it may be worthwhile to search the shrubbery and small trees to learn where your local Mockingbird, Cardinal, or Robin sleep. Even if the bird is out of reach the search is not wasted. By keeping notes on the type of vegetation selected, height above ground, location within the tree or shrub, etc., one can accumulate data that would represent a valuable contribution to the ornithological literature.

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WHO IS COLOR-MARKING RING-BILLED GULLS?

Among the hundreds of gulls on our Florida beaches this winter, I spotted two young Ring-bills that, in addition to a metal F&WS band on the right leg, bore a numbered colored tab on the left leg. The tabs looked like yellow oilcloth or plastic, perhaps an inch or an inch and a half square, and the figures were large enough so that I could read them clearly with my binoculars at about 20 feet, which was as close as I could get to the birds. If whoever marked these birds will send me the banding data, I will be glad to report to him the tab numbers and the date and place I read them. This is an intriguing technique that offers nice possibilities for yielding recovery data without having to catch and handle the bird.

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DECOYS

Bob Yunick writes: "As a result of the EBBA meeting there appears to be a fair amount of interest by some people in making silhouette shore bird decoys. If anyone is having difficulty enlarging the silhouettes from EBBA News of a year or so ago (Vol. 28, No. 1, pp 7-15) drop me a note and I'll send them a full-sized tracing of the blanks as I use them."

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