

OPERATION RECOVERY IN REVERSE

By Elise M. Dickerson and Philip G. Murton

For the two weeks from 26th April to 10th May an "operation recovery in reverse" was carried out on Block Island to band and study birds on their northward movement to their breeding grounds. This was a particularly interesting and informative operation as the birds netted and banded were in their full breeding plumage and a total of 891 were banded of 61 species (Table I). The wing measurements of all birds were taken and, during the first week, the weights of the majority.

In addition to the authors, Julian Dickerson spent the first week on the Island, Stanley Dickerson and Kitty and Frank Frazier joined the party for a long weekend in the middle of the period, and Michael Wagner was a great help outside school hours. We understand that Michael is presently applying for a banding permit and we hope that it will be granted as he shows great promise as a bander. The resident Block Island bird banders, Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Slate, were "on call" and gave invaluable aid by lending equipment, moral support and scientific "know how" particularly during the second week when the senior author was operating the station alone. To all these persons we offer our thanks for their valuable assistance.

Block Island is located 12 miles south of the mainland off the State of Rhode Island and is in line with, and between, Long Island and Martha's Vineyard, in a north easterly direction. It is eleven square miles in area and was first inhabited by a handful of settlers in 1661. It contains a maze of stone walls, 300 miles of them in all, and these were built by the early slaves and settlers who wanted the ground cleared of all stones and small boulders for pasture. These stone walls still stand and are presently the only "surveyor's" land marks used in property conveyances. They are 3 to 5 feet in height and are considered to be picturesque marks of distinction peculiar to the Island.

The island is roughly pear-shaped with a pointed sandy tip to the north and has two harbors, one on the east side and one on the west. Access to the island is by plane in to the small airport in the southern half, or by "once-a-day" ferries from three points on the mainland.

There are soil cliffs on the east side, which are quite sheer in places, and the western side slopes down to a sandy shore. The area covered by the rise and fall of the tide is quite small and therefore there is very little exposed sand for waders and shore birds. The whole island is dotted with over 100 natural fresh water ponds and pools, with one very large salt-water pond (which nearly cuts the island in two) in the center and the second largest (fresh) near the northern tip.

Vegetation consists of almost impenetrable thickets of shrubs, mostly Bayberry (*Myrica cerifera*) and Greenbrier (*Smilax rotundifolia*).

There are very few small woods of pine and other conifers. The grasses are generally coarse and not suitable for extensive grazing. In the area in which we were banding the climax plants were various species of goldenrod and milkweed.

Our station this year, as well as in the fall of 1959 and 1965, was located towards the north end of the island at the south east corner of Sachem Pond on Corn Neck Road (Fig. 1). We occupied a quaint old cottage and were able to use a "lean-to" extension at the back as our banding room and laboratory. The cottage stood in its own grounds, just off Corn Neck Road, with a small clump of overgrown wild fruit trees (unidentified) nearby, and open fields on three sides. A long hedgerow of rambler-type rose bushes marking one boundary of the cottage lot undoubtedly attracted many species of birds.

Across the road and immediately bordering the south east corner of Sachem Pond was an area of stunted bushes, marsh grasses and brambles through which our neighbor keeps a three foot path permanently cleared and mowed and here he kindly allowed us to put up nets. This area was particularly productive for warblers and migrants as our nets wound along the path and the tops of them were level with the tops of the surrounding foliage.

During the first week 18 nets were erected and kept in position day and night; this number was reduced to 12 during the second weekend, on the last Sunday of the period was reduced to three. Initially 9 nets were put up in a continuous line in the area across the road with two 60' ones at right angles to this line. Three nets were placed at right angles to the road in the field between our cottage and our neighbor's house to the north, and four were placed around the small clump of fruit trees near the cottage and in the short drive. Nets were furled very rarely and only when necessary because of rain or very strong winds. They were checked regularly half hourly or hourly throughout the daylight hours. Times between checks varied according to the movement of birds. The first net check was carried out each morning between 0500 and 0530 and the last by flash light shortly after complete darkness.

The types of nets in use varied. A large number of English ones were used, of varying lengths, plus a few EBBA nets and one or two of the newer tethered type sold by NEBBA. Both tethered and untethered nets were used. All were very satisfactory although smaller birds did tend to get more entangled in the American nets. Some nets were fitted with rubber bands at the ends of the trammels and others, mainly the English ones, had no rubber bands. Both types seemed to be equally successful in catching birds, i.e. they hung properly, although it was noted that those with rubber bands seemed to hold birds better, presumably as the trammels were more able to sag when a bird was caught. In addition it was discovered that nets with rubber bands at the ends of the trammels could

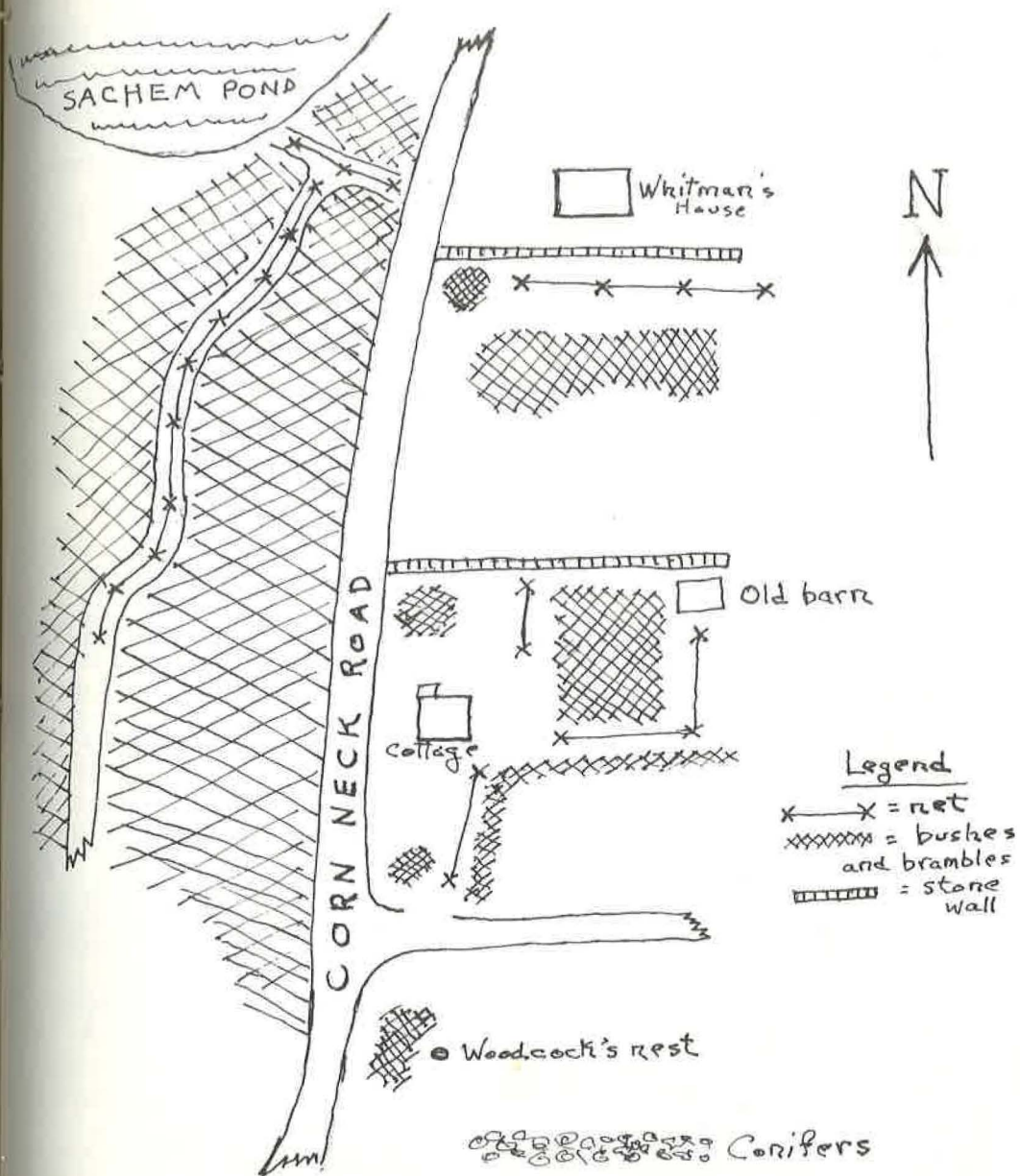


Fig. 1. Diagram of area in which we operated.
(Not to scale)

weather the gale force winds that frequently occur on Block Island. Two nets belonging to the senior author without rubber bands sustained 5 broken trammel lines during a storm during the night hours.

Only one full day was completely useless for netting and all nets were furled at first light and remained so all day. On this day a gale blew up with winds of over 25 mph and heavy rain fell nearly all day. During the rest of the first week fairly strong winds were experienced, despite clear sunny skies, but netting was very satisfactory. Nevertheless, billowing nets must have prevented a certain number of birds from being caught.

In the early part of the second week the weather continued to be fair and catches were reasonable, averaging just over 50 birds a day. However, on the last Sunday at about 0900 hours the worst storm we experienced made it necessary to furl all nets for the rest of the day. Only three nets were in use on the last Monday and Tuesday and these were located around the cottage.

The most outstanding day of the whole period was Sunday, 1st May when fortunately the greatest number of banders and "helpers" was available. From 0600 to 2015 a total of 254 birds of 29 species were caught and banded and, of this total, 109 were processed between 0818 and 1015 hours. No birds were weighed during this 2-hour period but all had their wing measurements taken following identification and banding. Our first indication that this was to be a "big" day was about 0715 when we were changing the location of a net east of the cottage. The bushes in the vicinity of this net seemed to be alive with birds (we counted 32 birds of 4 species of warblers in one small bush), and this movement was even more evident on our return to the cottage - the hedges and thickets held large numbers. On checking the net lanes all nets were found to contain a considerable number of birds, mostly warblers, and this was the beginning of a hectic and exciting 2-hour period.

When birds had been removed from the nets they were either held in small, individual bags or were placed in 8 to 16 cell gathering cages. These were carried to the banding room and all birds were processed there. After positive identification each bird was banded, its wing measurements taken and it was then weighed and, before being released, was examined in greater detail in order to determine age and/or sex. Variations in plumage were noted and consultations held with all banders in order to record accurate details.

The following books were used, when necessary, for reference purposes and proved most useful when there was any doubt over certain characteristics:

- A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS by Roger Tory Peterson.
THE BIRDS OF MINNESOTA & NEIGHBORING STATES by Thomas S. Roberts.
A NATURAL HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS by Forbush-May.



Above: (l to r) Philip Murton, Elise & Stanley Dickerson, Frank Frazier

At left: Julian Dickerson on Block Island (now with Army in Vietnam)

Below: Netting terrain at left and in background of picture of captured Sparrow Hawk



Few of the birds caught had injuries, although several Redwinged blackbirds had a scaly formation on their feet and legs (presumably Toe Pox). This infection was well advanced in one adult male whose toes were non-existent, the legs merely terminating in "knuckles." This bird was not banded, of course. One Song Sparrow and a Catbird had half their legs missing - in both cases the stumps were completely healed. Three female Redwings had broken left legs and in these cases the wounds had healed over the break without the loss of the broken portion of the limb.

In addition to carrying out netting and banding, pure "birding" was enjoyed over the two-week period and trips were made to various parts of the island on foot and by car. A number of interesting species were seen, and these are listed in one of the summaries at the end of this report (Table II). During one of the days when netting was impossible, the Herring Gull colony on the north west side of the island was visited and 21 near-complete nests were found. Two Mute swans were nesting near Sachem pond but the contents were not seen as a bird was continually on each nest. A Marsh hawk's nest was found between the cottage and the cliffs to the northeast - it was located in the center of a "field" of stunted bushes, about 200 yards from the cliff top. It contained one egg when found and, three days later had three eggs. A Woodcock's nest was also found a short distance from the cottage. This contained three eggs when found and, on the following two days, the bird was brooding, so it is not known whether the normal clutch of 4 eggs was laid. The nest was in an unusual site, as it was on the edge of a thin growth of bushes, at the base of a small bush, about 4 feet from a stone wall and only 75 feet from Corn Neck Road.

We wish to thank our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Whitman, for their kindness in letting us erect our nets on their land - without their cooperation very few birds would have been caught.

As far as we know this is the first time an Operation Recovery in Reverse had been seriously undertaken over a two week period on the east coast. Of course the two Canadian inland stations at Point Pelee and Long Point have been advocating the reverse operation for some time. If nearly 900 birds (and an excellent "return") can be caught on Block Island in 14 days in the spring, we wonder how many birds can be caught at other Operation Recovery Stations along the east coast at this time of year?

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The senior author wants readers to know that the above paper was almost entirely written by Flt. Lieut. Murton with only minor changes and suggestions by Mrs. Dickerson.

August 2, 1966
1490 Long Road, Somerville, New Jersey.
885 Easton Road, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

Table I - Summary of Species Banded and Netted

Month Day	April					May										Totals
	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Species																
Sparrow Hawk							1									1
R-t. Hummingbird							1									1
Y-s. Flicker							1	1	1							3
Y-b. Sapsucker			1				3	1								5
Downy Woodpecker												1				1
Eastern Kingbird										1			1			2
G.C. Flycatcher								1								1
Tree Swallow									2				2			4
Bank Swallow												2				2
Marsh Swallow							1					2		1		4
Blue Jay										1						1
B-c. Chickadee								3	1		1					5
W-b. Nuthatch	1										2	1				4
B-b. Nuthatch										1	2	5	1	2	1	12
Brown Creeper	1							3	3	1						8
Catbird		1			1			6	1		3	3	2	2		21
Brown Thrasher					1			1	1			1				4
Robin	3	3		4				4				2			1	17
Wood Thrush									2							2
Hermit Thrush								5	8	3	1					17
Veery									1		1				1	3
B-g. Gnatcatcher									1							1
C-c. Kinglet				3	4	2			1							10
W-c. Kinglet		5		8	3	16	2	4	1	1	2		2			44
W-e. Vireo											1					1
Solitary Vireo											2	1		1		4
Phila. Vireo													1			1
B. & W. Warbler	1						52		3	2			2	4	1	65
Blue-winged W.							3		1							4
Nashville Warbler												1				1
Parula Warbler							14					1				15
Yellow Warbler							2			2		1	3	4	1	15
Harnolia Warbler							1			1		1		1		4
Blk-th. Blue W.							3	1								4
Myrtle Warbler	58		17	19	71	39	16	49	23	18	8	8		2		328
Blk-th. Green W.							1				1					2
Chestnut-sided W.							2									2
Pine Warbler												1	1			2
Prarie Warbler								1								1
Palm Warbler	1	10		4	10	7		13	2		1					48

Summary of Species Banded and Netted (Cont'd)

Month Day	April					May										Totals
	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<u>Species</u>																
41 Ovenbird						2										
42 N. Water-thrush															1	2
43 Yellowthroat				1			1				1		1			1
44 R.w. Blackbird	2	6		1	3	4	1	1	1		1	1		2		4
45 Orchard Oriole						1										23
46 Baltimore Oriole											2	2			6	1
47 Common Grackle										1						10
48 B-h. Cowbird	1	1			1											1
49 Scarlet Tanager													2			3
50 Cardinal						1										2
51 R-b. Grosbeak						5	1				1					1
52 Evening Grosbeak						1										7
53 Purple Finch		1		2					1		2		1			1
54 R-s. Towhee						3	1	1								7
55 Savannah Sparrow	1	8		1	1	15	2	2	2	2	4	1				39
56 S-c. Junco		2														2
57 Chipping Sparrow				2		17	2				1	1	1		1	25
58 Field Sparrow						3	1		1							5
59 W-t. Sparrow	1	2		5	7	10	8	8	4	3	14	2	2			66
60 Swamp Sparrow		1				1										2
61 Song Sparrow	1	1		6	2	1						3				14
Daily Totals	12	10	-	54	42	254	96	47	82	40	64	41	33	12	13	891

62 W-c. Sparrow A return - banded by E.M.D. on Block Island last fall.

Table II - List of Species Seen (in addition to those banded)

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|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Great Blue Heron | 17. Great Black-backed Gull |
| 2. American Egret | 18. Herring Gull |
| 3. Snowy Egret | 19. Ring-billed Gull |
| 4. Eastern Green Heron | 20. Razor-billed Auk |
| 5. Black-crowned Night Heron | 21. Mourning Dove |
| 6. American Bittern | 22. Long-eared Owl |
| 7. Mallard | 23. Belted Kingfisher |
| 8. Black Duck | 24. Common Crow |
| 9. Blue-winged Teal | 25. Mockingbird |
| 10. Bufflehead | 26. Rusty Blackbird |
| 11. Hooded Merganser | 27. American Goldfinch |
| 12. Red-breasted Merganser | 28. Mute Swan |
| 13. Marsh Hawk | 29. Ring-necked Pheasant |
| 14. Osprey | 30. House Sparrow |
| 15. American Woodcock | 31. Starling |
| 16. Solitary Sandpiper | |