



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie



As I prepare to write about books for EBBA readers, I am looking out on a vista which opens to Nantucket Sound. It is just after Labor Day when summer slips lazily into autumn. An east wind that barely sways the mist nets turns the water to incredible and ever changing shades of blue. Billowy white cumulus piles up over Cape Cod, and the Sound echoes that whiteness with sails. Above the water drift the gulls and terns while the sun strikes blinding flashes of whiteness from their bodies as they dip and wheel.

As these sea birds dominate the landscape now, so they dominated my banding activities in late June and through July, particularly the herring gulls. Through many years I have banded thousands of them, and in some ways I feel very well acquainted with them. Then I read books and articles by persons who have lived in gull colonies all day from day to day, and I get the feeling that I know next to nothing.

There are three books on herring gulls that I want to mention, and perhaps some readers will report on others. The first is "The Gull's Way" written and illustrated by Louis Darling, published by William Morrow and Company in 1965, and priced at \$6.50. Do, at least get it from a library or sneak a long look at it in a book store.

Mr. Darling, you may remember, wrote the delightful and informative book entitled "Bird" in collaboration with his wife, Lois. Take a peek at that, also, if you aren't familiar with it.

In order to gather material for the book about gulls, Mr. Darling had himself marooned on a small island off the coast of Maine. The island was uninhabited by humans, but furnished nesting grounds for great black-backed gulls, eider ducks, Leach's petrels, black guillemots, double-crested cormorants, a pair of ravens, and several species of songbirds. The herring gulls the author went to study constituted the island's largest nesting group. "Visiting birds, wandering birds, traveling birds, and lost birds turn up constantly." Mr. Darling went to the island in late May when the gulls were about to start the nesting cycle, and stayed through the month-long incubation period, and the several weeks of juvenile development.

Although Mr. Darling's descriptions of bird life and of the sequence of herring gull activities are delightful and informative, the great

beauty of the books lies in reproductions of his colored photography and his black and white sketches.

"Argen the Gull" by Franklin Russell was published in 1964 by Alfred A. Knopf, and retails for \$4.95. The publisher's blurb gives a concise summing-up of the text. "No moment in the long and violent life of Argen, the herring gull, was placid. Even as a nestling, he had to survive crises and alarms. Even as an adult, graceful and guileful, confident and strong, he was never far from wariness and fear.

"We see Argen as a fledgling, fed by his parents; Argen as a juvenile, learning to feed and to fight; Argen as an adult, alternately breeding in the gullery and winging across his territory - across dunes, marshes, tidal flats, the offshore islands, the oceanic hunting grounds. We watch him learn to avoid creatures stronger than he and to prey on creatures weaker. We watch him survive a catastrophe and the buffeting of the seasons. When Argen's fierce energy at last diminished, then only did he cease to be that remarkably efficient creature, the herring gull."

If in reading this book you tend to belittle the anthropomorphic interpretations, eventually you will come to realize that the author has based his story on the results of long periods of observation on the rugged cliffs of Newfoundland. He knows a great deal about herring gulls, and has produced a sound life history in fiction form. This is a story that would appeal to anyone with a sense of adventure, whether bird watcher or bander, or neither. The book has a few photographic illustrations.

The two above mentioned books would make excellent propaganda to bestow on non-bird watchers. The third book of the herring gull trio is "The Herring Gull's World - A Study of the Social Behavior of Birds" by Niko Tinbergen. This book is one of a series called "The New Naturalist" published by Basic Books, Inc., and costing \$5.00. The editors describe this as a monograph but not a comprehensive monograph. The author states: "It has not been my aim to give anything like an exhaustive treatise of Herring Gull sociology. It is rather an attempt at a sketch of the problems as I see them now."

This is a scientific study and not recommended as a Christmas gift for the non-bird student. But the reading is not difficult and is most informative. It is considered more a book on behavior than on life history, but really you can't choose one aspect and completely ignore the other in ornithological writing. There's enough life history included to make the book eligible for our year's consideration of that subject.

Here are some of the chapter headings: First Arrival, Fighting and Threat, The Origin of the Threat Postures (this considers the phenomena of grass pulling and choking and is fascinating), Individual Recognition, Site Tenacity, Some Aspects of Fighting and Territory, The Old Pairs

(which considers individual recognition and monogamy), The Behavior of Mated Birds, The Origin of Courtship Displays, Analysing the Chick's World, Personal Ties.

The next to last chapter title heads a series of experiments that are not only extremely interesting in and of themselves, but that are indications of the sort of studies that can be made of the reactions of birds. I suggest it as required reading for bird banders.

The book is copiously illustrated. There are fifty-one photographs taken by the author, and very fine ones they are. There are also fifty-eight drawings and diagrams, some of which illustrate the unique and enlightening experiments on gulls. In cases where Franklin Russell used his imagination to describe how the gull felt and what he thought; Tinbergen, through experiment, "tells us an astonishing amount about the mind of a herring gull (and) also tells us more than a little about the workings of our own minds."

There is another Basic Book by Tinbergen which might be mentioned at this time called "Curious Naturalists" in which the author "relates the story of his twenty-five years of exploring the mysteries of animal adaptation, an inquiry which makes any ordinary detective story seem tame."

Tinbergen is an extraordinary man. A native of the Netherlands, he taught and did research in animal behavior at Leiden University, working not only with birds but with fish and insects. He worked closely with Konrad Lorenz, the great Austrian naturalist. (In time one of these features is going to be devoted to Lorenz.) In 1949 he went to Oxford University to organize a department of behavior-research. In addition to his other accomplishments he writes in fluent and idiomatic English.

- Mabel Gillespie

A new field guide, of particular value to banders, was published this summer - BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA by Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Bruun and Herbert S. Zim, illustrated by Arthur Singer. (Golden Press \$2.95.)

This new 'Guide to Field Identification' is pocket size, bound in paper and covers about 700 species - the 645 species of breeding birds, 30 regular visitors and 25 casual visitors.

Pictures of birds, painstakingly accurate, appear on right hand pages and facing each species is its brief description, a range map and a Sonagram to supplement the verbal song description. In many instances there are silhouette comparisons, in flight or at rest, of birds of similar size or appearance as well as special notes on flight or behavior patterns. When special details are necessary (such as the head and breast marks of sparrows or the plumages of fall warblers) thorough comparative illustrations are given. Our own Chan Robbins careful hand is very apparent throughout. This new guide will be most helpful to all banders as well as to birders.

- Frank P. Frazier