A SPECIAL BIRD BANDING PROJECT IN THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS

By Vernon M. Kleen

Last March I had the tremendous opportunity to make a trip to the Philippine Islands to visit some ornithological friends whom I had met in Tokyo last September at a Far East Science Conference. Since I was then stationed with the U.S. Army in Japan, I was able to make this trip at no expense. I had made arrangements in advance so that I would be able to join one of the bird banding teams while I was there.

Upon arrival in Manila and at the National Museum, headquarters for all banding in the Philippines, I learned that I could join one of three possible banding teams. The first was with Dr. Godofredo Alcasid down on the island of Palawan; the second was with Dr. Dioscoro Rabor on the island of Mindanao; and the third was with Mr. Manuel Celestino and Mr. Jaime Cabrera in the mountains of central Luzon, where a special banding project was in progress.

Since I had only five days to spend in the Philippines and my funds were limited, I really had only one choice. Although Dr. Alcasid and Dr. Rabor were the men I had met in Japan and had corresponded with in the Philippines, their banding stations were too far away for me to get to quickly without paying a small fortune. Also, banding was very poor at that time in both places. The trip to the mountains was simple, inexpensive, had better banding possibilities and offered new banding experiences. I was in the Philippines during the second week of March just as the height of migration was ending.

After touring the museum and making final arrangements for the continuation of my journey when I returned from the mountains to Manila, I was escorted to the bus that would take me to my mountain camping home for three days and nights. The bus left Manila at 12:30 pm. Philippine time (i.e. anytime after 12:30 when everyone is ready to go, which was finally 2:00 pm). The bus I rode was a Rural Transfer Bus - and that is exactly what it was. These busses break down quite often and when they do, you transfer to the next bus when it comes along. "Rural" was also appropriate, since it was used primarily by farmers and their families who had just been shopping in the city. They were bringing home caged animals, feed and fertilizer bags, oil drums, all kinds of fruit and vegetables and many other necessary items for their farms. The bus had no glass windows, but at least it had sides - many of them didn't even have these. Finally after eight long hours of rough but interesting riding, I arrived at my destination, Dalton Pass, at 10:00 pm., surprisingly without mishap.

At the top of the pass, the National Museum had constructed a small building to house the men, equipment and other necessary items used for the research projects that were going on. I was surprised to be greeted

Above: Local boy holding the V-shaped net used in capturing birds at night.

Left, top: Left to right, the author, Jaime Cabrera (bander), Rody del Rosario (botanist), Manuel Celestino (bander), Jun Cordero (botanist), Fred Almario (driver) and kneeling, Polon Igorot (cook and house boy).

Center: Philippine Hanging Parakeet (Loriculus philippensis).

Bottom: Yellow-breasted Fruit Dove (Ptilinopus occipitalis).

by six people when I arrived since I had only been informed of two of them, the bird banders. But the others were also part of the Museum's staff, three botanists and a truck driver. After introductions and coffee, we takled about their banding project for a while and then finally went to bed - a cot and sleeping bag had already been ready for me.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of strange bird noises and couldn't get dressed fast enough to see what was going on in the next room. When I did get there, I saw some Filipino kids bringing in birds for banding. This is where the story really begins.

A few years ago, members of the Ornithology Staff at the National Museum were commuting back and forth from the northern part of Luzon (the main and northernmost island of the Philippines) on various projects. Sometimes when they came through this particular pass, they saw several lights on the hillside near the top of the pass. When finally they stopped one time to find out what the lights were for, they were told that the local people were catching migrating birds at night for food. Of course, they had heard of different methods of capturing birds by shining lights such as that used for woodcock and other ground-roosting birds and also for birds in low trees, but this was completely new to them. So they quickly analyzed the situation and decided to see if this method could be practical for banding.

They discovered that the practice of catching night migrants started many years ago when the local people, called Igorots, noticed that on high ridges facing north, birds would fly into their firelit camps on foggy nights in September and October. They modified their camps by clearing small areas just below the crests of the pass and by building small bamboo huts with open fronts. They then built fires in the huts which caused the light to be directed only to the north, aiding in the capture of birds on moonless and foggy nights. The people would then stand beside the huts and use a V-shaped net to capture the birds as they saw them coming by.

Presently there are two locations where this practice is being used: at Sinipsips, at 7,000 feet altitude, and at Dalton Pass, 3,000 feet, both in the Central Ranges. Bonfires have been replaced by Coleman or pressure lanterns with reflectors attached so that they throw out a beam of light. Many species of birds can be caught in one night.

So the "scientists" as the local people call them, hired men to spend the nights on the mountain slopes catching birds for banding. This did not work very well, since the men weren't experienced and tired quickly - and actually "fell asleep on the job". Since these hired men did not supply many birds, the tactics were changed. The scientists started offering cash awards to the people who brought them birds. Some of the people brought sick and dying birds that had been caught a long time ago and had been kept in cages. Some birds couldn't fly and these were not acceptable.

So a rule was established that only birds caught during the previous night would be bought and soon they also had fixed standard prices for the different sizes of birds brought in. They paid a minimum of 5 centavos ($1\frac{1}{4}\phi$) for small birds and a maximum of $1\frac{1}{2}$ pesos (38ϕ) for large or highly valued birds. Before long they had regular visitors who brought in their entire night's catch to be sold.

This method of capturing birds has been called the "Sinipsips method" named after the town in the mountains mentioned earlier. It has proven worthwhile in the short time it has been in operation for banding. The method is practical at these ideal locations only during the two-week period when the moon is in its dark phase, and also since the local people are willing to do the catching. I was lucky to be there at the right time.

During the three days and nights I spent at Dalton Pass, over 150 birds of nearly 35 species were banded. The most common bird obtained while I was there was the little 5-inch Blue-breasted Button (Painted) Quail (Coturnix chinensis). Other interesting species were the Moorhen, (Gallinula chloropus), Dollarbird (Eurystomus orientalis), owls, swifts, and swiftless; pigeons and doves and several Grass Warblers, some Mannikins and a Philippine Hanging Parakeet (Loriculus philippensis). I took pictures of all the species banded and processed, and a few are shown here.

I have read of a few banders who have banded migrants in the mountains of Pennsylvania, capturing large numbers occasionally that pass over the mountains. I believe it is probable that night migration occurs over strategic mountain passes there, as it does in the Philippines; therefore I am wondering if any of the banders have noticed such a migration. If not, it might be advisable to stay later in the evenings; direct a strong light beam into the direction of the oncoming migrants and watch for these birds especially on dark or foggy nights. To help the situation, it would be practical to set up some mists nets behind the light and the one directly behind it should be set up doubly high, perhaps one net above another. The area should be cleared of obstructions so that the birds won't be alerted upon arrival. I am not presently able to try out this method myself, and if any readers are interested in doing so and would like some additional information, please contact me.

Some of the foregoing background material was obtained from "An Asian Bird-Bander's Manual" by Dr. H. Elliott McClure, 1966.

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