



May-June
A Bird Bander's Diary
 By Ralph K Bell

There were so many happenings during this busy time that it is hard to decide what would be the most interesting. First, there was the late and poor return of the Purple Martin migration population; our Sparrow Hawks; the Redwing nestling banding project; the trip to the annual Wildflower Pilgrimage at Blackwater Falls, W. Va. (a memorable event). EBBA member Clark Miller put on a banding demonstration there this year. Then came time for the breeding bird census (the June activity that may become as popular as the Christmas Bird Count). Next came the Brooks Bird Club Foray (June 10-18) at Romney, W. Va. where EBBA member Benjamin Burtt put on a superb climbing and hawk banding demonstration. Of the 110 species of birds found at the Foray, the most interesting, to me, were the two pairs of Blue Grosbeaks, the incessant singing of the three Dickcissels and the pair of Lark Sparrows feeding young.

May 8, 1967 ... A 40-degree temperature this morning with light rain. This is the third straight day of rain and we have had lots of rainy days this past two weeks. There has been just enough good weather in between to produce life-sustaining insects for the swallows, but the Bluebirds are in trouble. Before starting this Bluebird nest-box project, I never realized how continued rainy weather so directly affected nestling Bluebirds. The first box checked this morning showed five half grown young that were so cold and weak that they could not lift their heads. The young in the next box were in only slightly better shape and their survival was in doubt, unless the weather cleared, so I did not band them. Box no. 105 contained six dead young. This box suffered a similar fate last spring when we had snow on May 9. The type of insects Bluebirds prefer to feed their young will not hatch during periods of cold rainy weather and when young Bluebirds were fed an improper diet, as a substitute, the boxes were usually very wet and unsanitary. Even a nest full of five young Song Sparrows in our yard died during this period (and they would have left the nest in about four more days).

June 2 ... At about 5:45 this evening I received an excited call from the Antonacci boy saying "we have four of those young plovers in the house for you to band". His mother picked up the phone and asked "can you come right away? We have them in the kitchen now, but I'm not sure how long we can keep them". I called my sheep dog, Casey (he goes on many birding trips with me) and we jumped into the old Jeep and drove the three miles to the Antonacci farm. The parent Upland Plovers were along their driveway leading up to their house. The young plovers were "peep, peep, peeping" away in a shoe box covered with a telephone directory. I banded all four young quickly and immediately released them in the nearby pasture field. Unseen by us, the Antonacci collie - trained to catch chickens - raced by us and put a foot on one to hold it. Tragedy had struck as it was dead in a few seconds.

While I felt indirectly responsible for its death, there is a more cheerful long range side to the matter. The Antonacci's love the plovers and have watched over them ever since I told them several years ago that they were a rare bird. Whenever they mow their fields, there is always a careful watch to see that the young plovers get out of their way. The plovers often come into their yard to feed and they reported two pairs there at one time this spring.

This year I have found them on four different farms in the area. I have seen them on our farm on at least three different occasions, but they have never nested here to my knowledge. I believe the terrain is a bit too hilly and the grass too thick.

The best known Upland Plover area in the county, where I always take visitors that come just to see the plovers, is in flat farming country with some slightly pastured fields, divided by busy highway Route 21 near the village of Khedive. This also is the summer home of many Redwings and Meadowlarks; Killdeer, Horned Larks, Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrows, and a few Vesper Sparrows. The last of June 1964, I counted nine Upland Plovers in the field to the right of the highway (there were five this year on June 28). They often sit on posts just a few feet from speeding traffic and seem oblivious to it. I have often stopped the car to watch a plover on a post only 15 feet away. One never forgets their habit of holding their wings high over their head upon landing, then gently folding them.

The spring call is characteristic. Once heard, it will never likely be forgotten. To me, it is one of the most primitive and wildest calls in nature. If this call doesn't send chills up your spine - you are deaf or dead. Regarding this call, I like the description given in "A Natural History of American Birds" by Forbush and May: "Its cries are among the most pleasing and remarkable sounds of rural life. That long-drawn, rolling mellow whistle as the bird mounts high in the air has the sad quality of the November wind. Except the wail of the wind there is

nothing else like it in nature. It is an ethereal sound which might pass for the utterance of the fabled 'wind spirit' and its 'quitty-quit' as it rises startled from the grass is a distinctive, unique and pleasing call unlike that heard from any other bird."

This field-loving sandpiper winters in the pampas of southern Brazil and Argentina where it is hunted as a game bird. With this hunting pressure, plus housing developments and intensive farming here in the United States, its future does not look too bright. Future generations may never get to see and hear this inspiring bird - and that is a sad thought indeed.

Pre-migration orientation flights often start by the middle of July. I have often noted them making wide sweeping practice flights over our farm about an hour before sunset. The earliest fall migrant ever noticed was one going over on the evening of July 18, 1964, but most migrating Upland Plovers seem to go over during the first week in August. All are heard at dusk, heading southward at a very high altitude, and soon their periodic call becomes too faint to detect. I always hope they live to come north next April to perpetuate their kind.

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NEEDED: STUDENTS FOR FIELD WORK IN PANAMA

Dr. Horace Loftin, who is studying migrant North American birds in the Panama Canal Zone, would like to hear from any students interested in assisting in netting birds there during the autumn and/or spring, 1967-1968. Two or three graduate students will be needed each season. Round trip transportation to Panama will be paid, plus \$50 per week. The Editor has several of Dr. Loftin's more detailed announcement sheets and will furnish them on request; Dr. Loftin requests that interested students write him (together with a supporting letter from your major professor) at: Florida State University Center for Tropical Studies, Box 930, Albrook AFB, Canal Zone, Panama.

B.T.O. ORDERS Those interested in ordering mist nets and other banding material from the British Trust for Ornithology may obtain B.T.O. order forms by writing Squadron Leader P.G. Murton, RAF, 25 Cliff Drive, St. Louis, Mo. 63125. Orders for mist nets will not be accepted by the B.T.O. unless accompanied by a photostatic copy of the bander's permit, duly endorsed for the use of nets.