



OPERATION RECOVERY (BY THE U.S. COAST GUARD)

By Robert C. Frohling

For many years, I have been reading about the hazards and hardships suffered by the participants of Operation Recovery stations, particularly those engaged in the Island Beach project. Mosquitos, heat, dirt, bad food, fatigue and rustic lodging are but a few of the adversities which the participants have endured for the sake of science. Here now is a banding adventure which probably equals anything experienced by Operation Recovery banders.

Little Beach Island, a 3-mile long gem of oceanfront wilderness, lies some 30 miles southwest of the banding operations at Island Beach, New Jersey. It is truly an unspoiled island for no bridge touches its shores to permit access by the swarms of seashore visitors. For some time, I had wished to net there in the fall, to check on the possible coastal movement of birds banded at Island Beach. The opportunity finally came in September 1961.

The island is characterized by an oceanfront beach which sweeps north for over a mile, then splits around a large cove of quiet water (see the accompanying map). The outer strip of the fork fronts on Little Egg Inlet. It extends northward another mile or so beyond the oceanfront. The cove opens through a narrow channel into Great Bay. The main section of the island is covered with the vegetation of interior dunes, similar to that found at Island Beach. The outer strip contains grass-stabilized dunes at its southern end, but these become smaller and finally disappear into sand and mud flats at its northern terminus.

My plan was to enter the cove, debark on its western shore and set up camp in the shelter of the scrubby brush, which here comes down almost to the water's edge. Netting was to be done in the heavy vegetation immediately around the camp (location A on the map).

I set out on the morning of September 22, full of excitement and high hopes, via the only transportation available - the U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat stationed at nearby Tuckerton. Trouble started immediately. In attempting to enter the cove the deep-draughted vessel struck bottom and went into a long slow roll. Once we were afloat again, the "skipper" decided he would land me by rowboat (we had towed one out) on the outer strip. We transferred my equipment to the small boat, a sailor and I jumped in and we soon grounded on the beach. The two of us hastily unloaded, dumping my gear about 20 feet from the water's edge (location B). The sailor clambered back into the boat and I shoved him off the beach. Waving goodbye to my Coast Guard benefactors, I was alone on Little Beach Island at last. As a parting note, the sailor told me that there was a telephone linked to Atlantic City in the abandoned Coast Guard building at the center of the island (location C) in case I got into trouble.

I must admit to a sudden feeling of isolation as I watched the patrol boat swing northeast and on up the inlet. There was no time for meditation, however, as I was standing amid a pile of equipment - tent, sleeping bag, cooking gear, jugs of water, food, net poles, banding paraphernalia and everything else I needed for the next five days. The tide was rising and the pile of equipment was below the high-tide line. I quickly moved everything higher up on the beach, then paused to appraise my situation. I was near the center of a flat, barren sand strip. The camping (and banding) spot I hoped to reach lay about two-thirds of a mile away across a wide mud flat with about 100 feet of the cove intervening - or about two miles over the loose beach sand via the outer strip. I chose the former route. Taking the packet of metal tent poles and stakes, I worked my way across the sticky mud flats and then waded into the water of the cove, holding the poles above my head. The water reached to my armpits before I had gone halfway across. The tide was sweeping into the cove, deepening the water by the minute. I tried possible other fording places, but to no avail. So, I tramped back to the heap of equipment.

Time was fleeting and the only choice left was the long walk around the cove on the sand beach. Again, I started out with the tent poles. After a walk of some 25 minutes over the soft, tiring sand, I reached the first of the dunes (location D). But, I was still about a mile away from my destination and already hot, thirsty and weary. I left the poles and returned to the rest of the gear. Here I separated everything into prospective "loads". There were enough of these to require several hours of carrying just to reach the first dunes.

From some driftwood and a piece of canvas, I rigged a travois. It was quite primitive, but helped with some of the really heavy items like the tent. The transfer was grueling in the hot sun over the loose sand. To add to my misery during the hauling, I broke one of the gallon bottles of precious water. By the time everything was on the dune, I fell back exhausted.

I couldn't pause too long, however, for the afternoon was well along and much still had to be done. The hope of reaching the planned camping place had long since been abandoned, so the next task was to set up the tent on this outer dune. Putting up a tent alone, on a rolling dune of shifting sand, with a brisk wind tugging at the canvas, was a new experience. Time after time, when the apparatus appeared to be at the point of staying together, down it would come. One time, my aching muscles just gave way and the canvas and poles crashed down over my head. I sat there a while, under the jumble of canvas and aluminum, wondering whether to give up trying. Perseverance eventually triumphed, the tent went up and the rest of the equipment was stored safely inside.

For the first time since arriving in the morning, I could now think of the purpose of the trip. After lying awhile stretched out in the sand, I pushed myself into using what remained of the day to start the banding. With a "bush knife", four poles, two nets, a collecting cage and shoulder

bag of bands, I set out on the mile walk to the western shore of the cove, where I had originally hoped to land. No pre-cut net lanes, greeted my arrival, but rather an all but impenetrable thicket of bayberry, poison ivy, simlax and all the other species which constitute these seaside jungles (location E). Down in the thicket out of the breeze, the heat and mosquitos were brutal. By the time dusk descended, I had two lanes cut and two nets up. I walked back to the tent in the light of an almost full moon.

The weather continued warm and sunny for the next two days. More net lanes were cut, birds were caught and banded. The ocean shimmered in the sunlight, displaying its September blueness. I enjoyed the lovely primeval environment and the sense of isolation which it wrought. The closest I came to other humans were the fishermen whose boats bobbed about in the inlet (and this solitude in America's most populated state!).

I arose before dawn each day, ate a quick cold breakfast, made a sandwich for lunch and with jug of water in hand, tramped across the sand to the banding lanes. The nets were tended 'til sundown, when I would trudge back to camp. Before turning in, I liked to sit awhile on the dune watching the moonlight flicker on the waves.

About 1530 on the third day, the sky became overcast and the wind began to exceed its usual afternoon briskness. At sundown, while on my way back to the tent, I was struck by a sudden rain squall. It soon tapered off, however, and the sun went down a red ball. Before turning in at 2000, I went outside for a last look around. A full moon shone on a turbulent surf. The tide was high. The sky was clear but for light scattered clouds. The wind had freshened and threatened to cut off the lantern. I could see the lights of Brigantine, Holgate and Tuckerton.

About midnight, I was awakened by the tentpoles rattling above my head and by the canvas thrashing against the poles. I looked outside, but could see little in the heavy darkness. Further sleep was impossible. The wind continued to rise. Occasional bursts of rain beat a tattoo on the tent. Based on the direction and intensity of the wind, I was now convinced that a real northeaster was in progress. I knew that this kind of weather would last for several days, thus ending hopes of continued netting. Reluctantly, I decided it was time to leave the island.

With the first signs of daylight, I looked outside ... and what a sight. My dune was an island surrounded by the surging waters of the Atlantic Ocean! The entire outer strip was under water with only the dunes protruding like isolated mountaintops. Yet, it was still early in the morning. I had to await a reasonable hour to summon my rescuers.

The minutes crept by while I anxiously scanned the water to see if it were rising. Meanwhile, I packed the equipment as best as I could and took down the tent. Except for short squalls, the rain held off. Masses

of dark clouds hurtling before the gale-force winds threatened a deluge at any time, however. About 0600, I started across the beach for the abandoned station. The water ranged from calf to thigh in depth.

Atlantic City relayed my message (plea?) to Tuckerton and then reported that I would be picked up. I waded back to my dune-top, stopping to pick up the nets and poles on the way - luckily, I had furled the nets the night before.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, I spied the patrol boat moving off the beach. It was being tossed about like the proverbial cork in the churning waters of the inlet. I waved my arms and ran about on the dune to attract their attention, as they didn't know exactly where I was located. Finally, the craft hovered offshore and two seamen got into a small rowboat and headed shoreward. They rode through the breakers in good fashion and we were able to bring the boat almost to my dune over the flooded waters. We held a council of war and decided to have the sailors remove the equipment in two trips, then pick me up last. We loaded the boat, they got in and I pushed the craft into the surf. Watching our chance, we dashed out between the breakers. I guided the craft and helped propel it forward until the water was up to my chest. Out they went ... one oar stroke, two strokes, then wham - the ocean struck and they were swamped. In seconds, the flooded craft and its occupants were swept back upon the beach.

We unloaded, bailed out the boat, and decided on a new plan. This time we loaded all the equipment aboard the boat and tugged and coaxed it across the strand into the cove. The two sailors rowed north toward the cove's outlet where the waters were protected from the relentless pounding of the surf. I waded along on the inundated sand flats, treading carefully so as not to step off into deep water.

The patrol boat, bobbing about offshore, sensed our design and it too headed inland toward the mouth of the cove. With a great deal of anxiety, I watched my equipment being passed from the rowboat to the larger craft. Even in these somewhat protected waters, the wind had stirred the surface into a turbulence. Back they came, stowed me aboard and so the adventure swiftly ended.

Oh yes, I banded 108 birds of 25 species during the two days. And - have dreamed of the chance to return to this seaside paradise again. A late report from the Banding Offices states that a Catbird banded on the island on September 23, 1961 was recaptured at Towson, Maryland on November 7, 1966.

My wife, Patricia, prepared the map of Little Beach Island which accompanies this narrative.

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