



March-April
A Bird Bander's Diary
 by
 Ralph K. Bell

March 28, 1968 ... While checking some of my Bluebird boxes, I note that several nests have already been started. First impressions are that the Bluebird population is up and if the weather cooperates, this could be a banner year for them.

April 7 ... I felt impressed that some EBBA members took the time to visit our banding station after the meeting in Wheeling, W. Va. However, I feel an apology should be made since many of the traps (and nets) were not in position to show all the trapping locations. It was just too early in the season to get everything into operation. I'll admit the Barn Owl was a bonus. Since I hadn't seen any this spring, I had my doubts about any being in the box in the tree on the hill. I should also have checked the nearby Sparrow Hawk nest box as the female was in the box sitting on eggs (I didn't know this until later). It was also a little early for many Purple Martins. The first arrivals here were on April 2 - the latest arrival date since we have had Martins. My wife and I cordially invite everyone to visit us again sometime.

April 18 ... Full sets of Bluebird eggs noted in many boxes and young noted in one box. I believe they are getting started a few days earlier than last year.

April 19 ... The first House Wren of the year made its appearance today and announced its arrival by singing on top of the apple tree in our yard. Its song sent chills through me as I recalled the troubles this species caused on my Bluebird nest-box route last year. Probably the key to the survival of many Bluebirds (in this area) is the fact that some young Bluebirds are already hatched before the bulk of the House Wrens arrive. Much has been said and written about the House Sparrow being such an enemy of the Bluebird, but I am wondering if the House Wren could be more of a threat. I hesitate to write all the bad things observed pertaining to the House Wren for fear some readers will write me heated letters saying I am not a true bird lover. Therefore, let me first say

that House Wrens have always been permitted to nest here. In fact, last year (1967) they nested in one of my favorite Bluebird nest boxes in the yard, and all five young were banded and left the nest successfully. Economically, the House Wren is a valuable bird and feeds on many injurious insects.

Until about 15 years ago, the House Wren was just another bird to me. It was then that I saw this wren fly into an evergreen tree in our yard where I knew there was a Robin's nest with four eggs. The House Wren left in a short time and I immediately checked the nest and noted a tiny hole in each Robin egg. There would now be less competition for food in the future. While I am on the subject, I would like to quote the following from W.E. Clyde Todd's Birds of Western Pennsylvania (1940):

"The House Wren is naturally pugnacious and aggressive in disposition and soon comes in contact with other native birds. In particular it represents the presence in its chosen territory of species with similar nesting preferences, such as the Purple Martin, the Tree Swallow, the Bluebird and the Chickadee, and it usually succeeds in driving them off and appropriating their nesting sites. Not only on these does it wage war, but on other species as well - never openly, but surreptitiously - by the simple method of puncturing the eggs and heaving them out of the nest. The evidence for this villainous habit is abundant and conclusive and has been aptly summarized by Miss A.R. Sherman in her timely article, 'Down with House Wren Boxes' to which the doubtful reader is respectfully referred (Wilson Bulletin, 1925, 37:5-13). The Wren has its defenders, but the weight of evidence is against it. Miss Sherman points out that 'the destructive habit has increased disproportionately with the increase of the species', and she rightly attributes this increase to 'the campaign for erecting boxes for wrens; boxes with small openings that protected the wrens from their natural enemies and enabled them to breed in undue numbers. That the species needs no such protection, but survives in plentiful numbers in the remote portions of its breeding range is another fact proven by the regional lists printed in the bird magazines.' Miss Sherman also shows that the marked decrease in the numbers of certain other birds that formerly frequented our orchards and gardens can be directly connected with the unwonted increase in the ranks of the House Wren. This is merely another instance of the disastrous results produced by man's interference with the balance of nature.

"I fully endorse the remedy suggested, which is not the extermination of the species, but the removal of the nest boxes, which would place the bird on its own resources, as of old. Either we must do this, or else we must be prepared to justify, for future generations and to ourselves, the dearth of such birds as the Yellow Warbler, the Chipping Sparrow, of the Baltimore Oriole, the Warbling Vireo, the Bluebird, and others equally beautiful and desirable. I wish to put myself on record as being absolutely opposed to any further partiality towards the House Wren and to making it the chief beneficiary of the new interest in bird life that has

come into vogue. Its excessive increase in numbers is as deplorable as the decrease in the numbers of our waterfowl and birds of prey."

The House Wren has not always been a common bird here in southwestern Pennsylvania. In fact, Audubon considered it rare west of the Allegheny Mountains and did not record it at all in Kentucky or Louisiana. Even now, this wren could be considered rare in some parts of Greene County, but it seems to be spreading and occupying new territory each year. Dr. S.S. Dickey, the oldest ornithologist in this area, believes he saw his first House Wren in Greene County during the summer of 1909. However, J.W. Jacobs in his publication "Summer Birds of Greene County" (1893) listed the House Wren as a nesting species.

April 28 ... While banding nestling Bluebirds in the Loves Hill area this morning, I heard a Bewick's Wren (one of my favorites) singing and soon located the nest in an old unpainted building - the usual nesting place for this species. The Bewick's Wren was noted in the same general area last summer as was the Red-headed Woodpecker and Summer Tanager. All are rare here in Greene County. Since the Bluebird is abundant here, the Loves Hill area could be called unique.

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FOREIGN RECOVERY INFORMATION EXCHANGE

We have heard from one of the birds listed in the March-April issue: Purple Finch 63-83398 was picked up, dead, in Richmond Virginia on Jan. 21, 1968 by Elise Lapham (of New Canaan, Conn., who happened to be visiting friends in Richmond). It had been banded exactly seven years earlier, on Jan. 21, 1961, in Richmond by Frederick R. Scott - as an adult male, which means that this bird was at least 9½ years old.

Five more foreign retraps have been reported - to make this column more worthwhile, readers are fervently urged to check their records to see if any of these are familiar, and drop a card to the Editor. It might be well to mention that if the bander for some reason does not want to have a recovery published, we will respect his wishes.

Black Skimmer	544-60205
Blue Jay	763-40815 (also color banded)
Cowbird	63-136437
Cowbird	71-177059
White-throated Sparrow	101-183411