

Sept.-Oct.

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
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Sept. 1, 1968 ... The Brooks Bird Club always has an outing over the Labor Day weekend and this year it was held at Davis, West Virginia - an old lumbering town that reached its glory around the turn of the last century. It is a quiet sleeping town now, compared to the busy bustling town of yesteryear when the surrounding mountains were covered with virgin forests and lumber was kind. In some respects the town could probably be compared with some in the "wild west" as bullet holes can reputedly still be seen in the wall of the Gas Light Saloon - closed long ago and due to be torn down in the near future along with its water-powered fans, marble rail, and other antique fixtures. It is a shame that the present owner does not see fit to preserve it as a relic of days gone by.

Fifty-two bird club members turned out for the outing and we had quite a weekend visiting surrounding areas of interest such as Blackwater Falls and Canyon, Dolly Sods, Red Creek Campground (where our O.R. banding station is located), Bear Rocks (3 miles north of our banding station and a wonderful place to watch and count migrating hawks), Greenland Gap, Mt. Storm, Stony River Dam, and of course Canaan Valley that was a vast wilderness until the early 1880's.

One of the big events of the weekend that would be of interest to EBBA members was the Woodcock banding expeditions led by Bob Kletzly and Joe Rieffenberger (who gave the talk on Woodcock banding at the EBBA meeting in Wheeling last spring). Warden Hotel in Davis is "home base" and these boys have been making a special study of Woodcock here for several years. They really have a big thing going here and band several hundred Woodcock every year. Their present technique for capturing them really works. At one time they used long lines of mist nets but now most are captured by night using a strong portable light and a 32-inch diameter hand net with a ten foot handle.

Three foot wide paths are closely mowed through various Canaan Valley

farms during the summer. The Woodcock seem to prefer these mowed lanes instead of the surrounding high grass. Several of us rode in the back of the Jeep truck as Bob and Joe drove up and down these lanes looking for Woodcock. When one is spotted, the truck is stopped immediately and a member of the team grabs a portable light and the hand net and walks up to within a few feet of the bird - keeping the light on the bird all the time - then dropping the hand net straight down. We "spotted" a Savannah Sparrow with the strong light and it picked around as if trying to find weed seeds. A Nighthawk and two Woodcock were captured. Several Woodcock flew up before we were very close and these may have been captured earlier as the fields are "run" once a week. We were all given a first hand demonstration of how to age and sex Woodcock. John Morgan and I have often talked about the possibility of this technique being used by banders for catching Killdeer, Meadowlarks and many other ground birds for banding purposes. The possibilities seem tremendous. The Woodcock boys gave both of us the necessary equipment in the hopes that we could capture and band some Woodcock and help them with their studies about this bird.

Oct. 12 ... At our Red Creek Campground Operation Recovery Station. The fourth annual Highlands Weekend Review is being held in the surrounding scenic areas this weekend. Those in charge expect to equal last year's attendance of over 400 interested persons. It is sponsored by the West Virginia Conservancy and its cooperating organizations. Also, the U.S. Forestry Service and the West Virginia Dept. of Natural Resources cooperated with the Conservancy with a program to familiarize interested persons with the necessity of preserving the natural values of the wild lands and rivers of the West Virginia highlands.

The brochure put out by the Conservancy listed the O.R. Banding Station first in the schedule of events with the following statement: "Sat. Oct. 12, 6 am. to 11 am. (also on Sunday Oct. 13) BIRD BANDING DEMONSTRATION at Red Creek Campground. Licensed bird banders will maintain mist nets in which many birds, especially songbirds, may be captured. The birds are removed from the nets, banded, and released without harm. Generally, banding is best between sunrise and 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning. Sponsored by the Brooks Bird Club and the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania."

Other events listed in the brochure are as follows: An 11-mile float trip through "The Trough" with reservations necessary as rafts and all necessary equipment is furnished; a seven-mile hike from the top of Spruce Knob, West Virginia's highest mountain; hawk-watching at Bear Rock; cave trip into the Sinks of Gandy; rock climbing demonstrations on the south and west faces of Seneca Rocks at the mouth of Seneca; giant outdoor dinner at the mouth of Seneca Pavilion; and at 8 pm, "Our Natural Resources in Review" presented by the W. Va. Dept. of Natural Resources to be held in the Seneca Rocks elementary school.

It was a beautiful morning and there was a fair flight of birds going

over but most were too high for the nets because of the lack of wind. John Morgan had volunteered to help today and lots of people came to see the banding operations and ask questions. When banding slowed down toward noon, I decided to accept an invitation by some friends to go along on the Sinks of Gandy cave trip. The cave was formed centuries ago when Gandy Creek tunneled a short cut under Yokum's Knob. I had always wanted to go through the cave, but at Foray time there hardly seems to be time for such things and during the Wildflower Pilgrimage in May there is usually too much water. We arrived at the Sinks ahead of the main group and since we had plenty of flashlights, decided to go through the half-mile tunnel on our own.

The passageway probably averaged about 30 feet wide and eight feet high, and there were two rooms that were about 60 by 60 feet. At the entrance we noted about two dozen Barn Swallow nests and about 100 yards back in, a Screech Owl stood on a ledge above a large pool of water. Since the water was low, at no time did we have to wade in water over a foot deep. At times the walking was easy, but in places it was quite rocky with four-foot dropoffs, low ceilings, and some very slippery banks. Finally, near the end, we reached what seemed to be an impasse. The ceiling dropped very low over a deep pool of water. None of us had ever gone through before and we pondered our next move. If we went through that pool it appeared we would have to swim out and no one wanted to get that wet. I tried a passageway to the left, but that abruptly ended within 50 yards. We then went to the right and soon felt a good draft of air and knew this had to be the right way. We were out in the bright sunshine in a few more minutes.

Oct. 13 ... 51 degrees, partly cloudy with a light west wind. A truly beautiful mild day for this high altitude in October. Interested people attending the Highlands Conservancy weekend seemed to have no trouble finding our banding location and started arriving soon after daylight. I had to take birds out of the nets, process them and answer questions alone, as John Morgan had to leave last evening. I have always felt that favorable education of the public should be one of our prime objectives. I have seen elderly people that were very afraid of birds, so I make a point of educating the youngsters - by participation. Plenty of birds were flying into the nets and eager eyed children were watching intently as I removed the birds. A 12-year-old girl said she was afraid of birds because they might "bite". Since I could use some help I asked her if she could help by holding a bird until I was ready to band it. Before she could answer I had pushed a Black-throated Green Warbler into her hand. I showed her how to hold its neck between two fingers and gently but firmly hold the bird's body in the palm of her hand. I then asked an interested little boy of eight or nine if he didn't want to hold one in each hand. That did it. Little hands were being held up everywhere and pleading voices asking to help too. They were all so proud to help by holding "those pretty birds" until I could band and process them. Others would vie for the privilege

of releasing them. We should encourage these youngsters to like and enjoy nature and the outdoors. They are the future birders and conservationists.

Banders present at our O.R. station some time during the fall were Connie Katholi (Charleston, W. Va.), Maxine Kiff (Ona, W. Va.), Anne Shreve(Charleston, W. Va.), Cora Williams (Indiana, Pa.), Dr. George A. Hall (Morgantown, W. Va.), Jack Linehan (Newark, Del.), Clark Miller (Inwood, W. Va.), John Morgan (Charleroi, Pa.), Bill Noonan.(Reidsville, N.C.), Tom Olsen (Greensburg, Pa.), and the writer.

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This delightful photograph has been in our files for some time, but we cannot identify its source so cannot give credit to the photographer. If anyone recognizes it as his, please let us know. -Ed.