



Nov. ~ Dec.

A Bird Bander's Diary

By Ralph K. Bell

Nov. 16, 1968 ... A very weak and thin "HY" Turkey Vulture was found hunting for earth-worms in a plowed field in nearby Washington County today by Merle Grable. It was lame in one leg and unable to fly, and may have been mistakenly shot at earlier in the month during Wild Turkey season. There was no doubt that it was eating earth-worms as it disgorged over a cupful when captured. Merle is interested in birds and took it home and placed it in a large enclosure; he fed it dead animals found along local roads.

Dec. 21 ... The Turkey Vulture left for parts unknown at about 11 a.m. today. Merle had fed it well and it gained weight and strength fast. Three days ago the pen was opened but the Turkey Vulture did not attempt to escape until yesterday when it came out and flew to a big tree about 200 yards away. There it had spent the night and left this morning. Merle had wanted me to band it but I declined, since it was not normal and I presumed that if it did get well enough to fly, it would have lost its desire to migrate so late in the season. Perhaps I was wrong in not banding it and I don't think the F&W Service authorities would have disapproved since things turned out the way they did. If the vulture had carried a band there is always the possibility that something could be learned, such as, did it stay here and try to make it through the winter or did it migrate? Did it go to the normal wintering grounds for the species? If it made it south for the winter, would it come back north to breed next spring? Without a band, there is no possible chance of finding the answer.

Dec. 28 ... It was raining hard when John Morgan picked me up at 6:15 a.m. and we drove to Ohiopyle in neighboring Fayette County to help Lee Lowden, naturalist for the Western Pa. Conservancy at Fallingwater, with his Christmas count. Much of Fayette County is quite mountainous and this higher altitude noticeably affected the kind and numbers of birds that we found. One of the first birds we noted after arriving at the Lowden residence was an Evening Grosbeak and soon about twenty of them were in the trees above his feeder. In fact, this species proved to be the most abundant bird recorded during the day - over 200 were listed. A total of 35

species were found with a Chipping Sparrow being the most unusual one for the area. It was in a residential section with numerous evergreens and several feeders. This probably accounted for its being there.

Newly formed Ohiopyle State Park lies within the count area and we saw many farms that had just been abandoned to make way for the park. I viewed all this with mixed feelings. We need parks and recreational areas but it seems depressing to think that those fine old homesteads will be no more. Already the vandals are at work breaking windows and doors and making a mess of things in general. When one ponders over the hopes and dreams that went into those family farms it all seems so sad.

Dec. 30 ... Early this morning, soon after daylight, I opened the kitchen door and there in the yard were two Cedar Waxwings. And how we had looked for them yesterday during our annual Clarksville, Pa. Christmas count in the area! At 10 a.m., a Golden-crowned Kinglet was calling from the evergreens in the yard and species had also been missing from our list. EBBA members Lee Lowden and John Morgan had arrived early yesterday to help with the count. We first checked the multiflora rose hedge that forms the west border of our farm. The Pheasants and White-crowned Sparrows eluded us but we did find six Mockingbirds - an all-time record for numbers. Before the introduction of the rose hedge into our area, the Mockingbird was considered a rare bird. Now they can be found almost any time during the winter by checking the longer rose hedges in the area. It is still being argued whether the multiflora rose hedge is more of a curse than a blessing. There is no doubt as to its being a great benefit to wildlife, not only as shelter the year 'round but the rose hips are a source of food for many birds when most other foods are covered with the deep snows of winter. I have known huge flocks of Robins practically to live on those rose hips for days at a time when no other food was available. Cedar Waxwings often feed on them during the fall, winter and spring months. The main objection to the multiflora rose is the fact that it spreads so easily, with birds being the principal carrier and dropping the seeds over a wide area. We keep it in check here by mowing and digging them out of the fields. The rose grows profusely in fields and woods and it is almost impossible to walk through such areas after a number of years of uncontrolled growth.

After checking the hedge, we came back to the house and found five Evening Grosbeaks at the feeder - the first I had seen in our yard this year. They had been at feeders in the area but because of their roving habits, I was afraid this species might be missed. By 9 a.m. we were driving around to the most promising areas to try to get a good sampling of the species, and numbers of individuals, that were attempting to winter in the area. Crows easily led the most abundant list with 4281. They seemed to be everywhere - in the fields, woods, and some were even noted on lawns. Among the rarer species was a Phoebe. While this bird is not really unusual here (it has been recorded on five other counts since 1953),

I have often wondered if they are able to "make it" during years of long periods of heavy snow cover. There is no doubt that a Phoebe will eat seeds and wild fruit as a substitute for insects. B.H. Warren in "Birds of Pennsylvania" (1890) states that he has observed them feeding on raspberry, blackberry, pokeberry, wild grape and cedar. I have always suspected that they may also feed on the poison ivy berries that the woodpeckers and Myrtle Warblers seem to like so well.

The Phoebe was found in some willows along a creek. We had our car windows down and were listening for call notes of birds as we drove along. Suddenly, the unmistakable chip of a Phoebe was heard. We stopped immediately but it was some time before we found it. John detected a movement in the willows and later we watched it fly down to the water's edge and pick up something to eat.

We checked all the old Killdeer haunts and I was getting ready to give up on this species when we decided to try an old country road past a beef-cattle farm. We checked the muddy barnyard that had a small stream running through it and there were our Killdeer, and three of them at that. We will now add this place to our list of places to visit next year.

We could only find five Bluebirds and they were all on the telephone wires here at home when we came back. One of these sleeps in an old Barn Swallow nest under the eaves of our barn. Our species total was 42 - just about average - but the individual total was up, with 5942.

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