



March-April

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
Ralph K. Bell

April 16, 1969...The friendly Black-caps have all left for home. This proved to be the last day that Black-capped Chickadees were to be seen here this spring. Since we live in the Carolinian Life Zone area of extreme southwestern Penna. at an elevation of 1000 feet above sea level, the Carolina Chickadee and not the Black-cap is our resident bird. The Black-capped Chickadee is generally larger, has more "frosting" on the wings, a whiter cheek, and a longer tail (any chickadee with a tail measurement of 59mm or longer is most certainly a Black-capped Chickadee and any full grown tail that measures 56mm or less can safely be called a Carolina Chickadee).

The long tail of many Black-caps is quite noticeable in flight and one was seen going through our yard at noon today. Another one was captured and banded - it had a tail measurement of 61mm so there could be no doubt of its identity. This north-eastward movement of Black-caps through our yard has been observed for the past two or three weeks. Most were in very small groups - often of only two or three birds, but they were always so restless and generally on the move. The pattern was often the same. They would first be heard in the evergreens to the west of our yard, then they would take short flights through the trees until they reached the east edge of the yard. Since an open field was between them and the next bunch of trees, the chickadees would work their way up to the top branches of either the tall Sycamore or Elm Tree - call several times and then take off in an easterly direction. Whenever the wind was rather strong from the south or southeast they flew with difficulty and no doubt the distance travelled on such days was quite limited.

My interest in Black-capped Chickadees this year started when Aaron Bagg published a note in the Nov.- Dec. 1968 issue of EBBA NEWS asking

for observations about the big chickadee migration last fall. Aaron planned to give a detailed report about the fall 1968 Black-capped Chickadee migration in the "Changing Seasons" summary of the February 1969 issue of AUDUBON FIELD NOTES.

In working up my banding data, I found that there is usually a fall influx of Black-caps every two years, with one exception: 1965 and 1966 were both migration years here. The first Black-cap captured and banded here last fall (1968) was on Sept. 25....the earliest ever, but only two days earlier than the Sept. 27 date of both 1957 and 1959. The last migrant chickadee was banded on Nov. 2.

But it was not until the very cold Monday morning of Jan. 27, 1969 that the most exciting event of the winter season happened. The temperature was 3 degrees above zero that morning and because of the cold, sunflower seeds were not put out early as was the usual custom. The only seeds available were in a single cell trap that had been left set the night before. At 8:30 a.m. I noticed a chickadee in the trap and went to remove it and also bait and open the other traps. To my surprise the chickadee had a band on the left leg (I almost always band on the right leg). In checking the band numbers, I found that they were not familiar and then knew I had a foreigner. Any bander that has caught a bird with a foreign band can appreciate the excitement that goes with such an event.

Measurements were taken....wing 66mm, tail 64mm and its fat rating was 0. Since chickadees have been observed migrating southwestward through our yard each fall (on migration years) it seems safe to assume that this chickadee might have been banded in the New England area, especially since Bob Leberman had reported banding a Black-cap at the Powdermill Nature Reserve (Rector, Pa.) on April 11, 1964 that was later recovered by G. Round at Greenbush, Maine on Feb. 13, 1966.

I immediately reported this recovery to Aaron Bagg in hopes that he might have some necessary information since he was doing the special study on this chickadee migration. Aaron, in turn, wrote to several big chickadee banders in the New England area, including Mrs. Kathleen Anderson, Mrs. John Fiske, G. Hapgood Parks and John Weske, who often bands at Chamberlain, Maine but lives in Sandy Spring, Maryland. Mr. Weske called the banding office at Laurel, Md. The banding office was quite cooperative and checked their files and found that the chickadee was banded by James Baird of Littleton, Mass. Mr. Weske reported the information to Mr. Bagg and just 11 days after Black-capped Chickadee # 701 was caught here, the telephone rang and Aaron Bagg was on the other end telling me that James Baird had banded the chickadee at Littleton, Mass. in Sept. 1968. What cooperation. I was really impressed by Aaron's phone call from Dover, Mass. that morning. Banders are really a dedicated group and so willing to help each other. It's great to be a member of such a team.

James Baird later gave me more detailed information about this chickadee. It was banded Sept. 19, 1968 - was an immature, with a wing measurement of 66mm, weighted 12.1 gms, and was fat classed at 0 (indicating that it may have been migrating many miles already (my comments). Mr. Baird told me that a chickadee migration was very much in evidence at the time as small bands of them were continually flying south-westward through his area.

Apparently this chickadee spent the entire winter here as it was captured a second time on March 12, this time in a woodpecker trap baited with suet. Its fat reserves were already starting to build up, apparently in preparation for its return flight. I wished later that I had obtained a permit to color mark it on the throat to see how long it stayed here before leaving for its summer home.

There have been other chickadee recoveries in the western Pa. and West Virginia area. Aaron Bagg wrote me about another recovery from last fall's migration. EBBA member Valerie Freer (Ellenville, N. Y.) banded an immature chickadee on Sept. 23, 1968 (probably in migration at the time) that was found dead 42 days later about 55 miles NNW of Clarksville, Pa. Also, Bob Leberman has reported fall migration recoveries (Powdermill Bird Banding Report - 1964). One banded at Powdermill Oct. 26, 1963 was hit by a car less than two months later in Morgantown, W. Va. (reported by EBBA member Dr. George A. Hall) and another banded Nov. 3, 1963 was trapped and released on Feb. 23, 1964 near Charleston, W. Va. All these recoveries indicate a south-west chickadee migration through this area in the fall during migration years.

There are still other questions to be answered, such as; what causes a chickadee to terminate its migration? Since chickadees (apparently) do not migrate every year there are probably a lot of variables. Is it just by chance, or food, or terrain, or a combination of a lot of factors? One would suppose that a chickadee that grew up in a heavy wooded area in New England would prefer the same type of habitat on its wintering grounds, but can we be sure that this is so? Do most of the adults stay on the breeding grounds, or migrate part way, or migrate as far as the immatures? Of the 29 aged here at Clarksville last fall, only 2 were adults but to draw a conclusion here, age data will have to be compiled from many banding stations - including those in the breeding areas.

Therefore, the point is, we "so-called" backyard banders can contribute much yet to our knowledge of even a very common species like the chickadee. When anyone asks me why I band birds, I tell them it is to learn. A college professor once said "one of the main reasons for living is to learn". Why are the astronauts going to the moon....it is to learn. People with a desire to learn (and are doing something about it) are happier human beings and fulfilling one of the basic needs of life.