



July-August

A Bird Bander's Diary

by Ralph K. Bell

July 9, 1969 ... My brother Frank is here from Japan for a two-week visit and we took a field trip today that included the flat farmland country about four miles south of here to look for the Upland Plovers. They were easily located in their usual field along busy highway #21 near the village of Khedive. The plovers were evidently flocking already as nine were observed in this one field. While man and his habits have been very detrimental to some bird species, he has helped others here in the eastern U.S. by clearing away the forests. Included in this list should be the Quail, Killdeer, Bluebird, Red-winged Blackbird, Meadowlark and several sparrows. The Upland Plover also moved into areas to its liking after the forest was cleared and became quite common in some places before the greed of man caused them to be shot for food (money) and depleted their numbers until they are now very rare over much of our region.

The type of farming on the Fuller and McMullen farms is apparently an ideal habitat for the plovers as they have nested there for many years. They were also found in three other locations in the county this summer. Although the Bluebird is my favorite bird, the beautiful and striking notes of the Upland Plover are to me the greatest sounds in nature. Once heard they will never be forgotten. Even the migration calls of many species of birds produce their share of mystery and wonderment of far-away places, but the rolling trill that comes down from the heavens as Upland Plovers pass high overhead really excites the imagination.

Aug. 9, 1969 ... While checking Bluebird box No. 172 today, I was quite surprised to find something I had never even considered before. When I had banded the three young Bluebirds in this box on July 9, I had noticed mites on the young birds and on July 17, mites were all over the

box and the growth of the young Bluebirds seemed retarded. This is the second Bluebird box where mites were noted this year and these are the first I have ever noticed on Bluebirds. In this area, mites are often found in Purple Martin boxes and in Phoebe nests, and occasionally in Barn Swallow, Red-eyed Vireo and Red-winged Blackbird nests. Mites can be a very serious problem and since Phoebes are bothered so much by this pest, I feel they are a major controlling factor in the abundance of this species, at least in this area. The habit of Phoebes of building their nests on a sheltered ledge above a door or window (and the resulting mite problem) has lost the bird world many potential friends. Homeowners would relate to me, with disdain in their voice, their experiences with Phoebe nests over the kitchen door ... the multitude of crawling mites on the nearby door frame and walls ... the dying young in the nests despite the frantic efforts of the parents to keep them alive with plenty of food.

The fact that mites can be lethal was amply demonstrated to me last year. On June 28th, I found a Mockingbird nest here on the farm with three young. This species was quite rare in this area 30 years ago but with the help of multiflora rose plantings, it can now be seen along many roadsides. I banded the three young and noticed they were light in weight for their size but didn't even think of mites as being the possible cause until I checked the young two days later and found one dead. Mites were now all over the nest and young. I had a can of cat flea powder in the car (to kill fly larvae in Bluebird boxes) so I sprinkled the powder over the two remaining young to see if it would have any effect. It didn't help a bit and another young bird was dead the nest day (July 1). Evidently the third young Mocker was able to climb up into the upper branches of the tree and got away from that mite-infested nest. At least it lived as I caught it in a water-drip trap three months later. It would be interesting to know if this bird would always be a carrier and any future offspring would suffer also. No doubt some birds rid themselves entirely of mites, either by dusting in certain soils or other means, otherwise one would think that the mite problem would be much worse than it is. Another possibility is that these carriers are often so weakened by the continual drain on their energies that they die before the next breeding season.

Usually one nest of Barn Swallows here on the farm will contain mites but this year a total of 19 pairs nested here, four more than usual, and not one nest contained mites.

To get back to Bluebird box 172 - as it was checked today, I noticed lots of small ants in the box but not one mite could be found. Evidently the ants had consumed all the mites after the young Bluebirds had left the box not over 15 days before. Experience with Purple Martin houses has shown that very large numbers of mites are still in the boxes even two months after the birds leave. While I cannot be certain that the ants ate the mites, the evidence is quite suggestive. I do know that I'm always amazed at nature's checks and balances.

Formerly, I considered Malathion a good safe dust to use on mites, but now I'm not sure since seeing a report by W.R. McKaskill, Poultry Science 47: 172-73 (1968); Clemson, S.C. It stated that 40% of all bulk lots of Sevin and Malathion dusts were found to be cross-contaminated with more than 200 ppm. of DDT. DDT concentrations ranged as high as 25,450 ppm. with an average of 3,900 ppm. Contamination was attributed to poor quality control during formulation since it varied with the company and time of formulation.

Mr. Lawrence Zeleny says that rotenone has very little toxicity for warm-blooded animals and that a 0.5% rotenone powder is commonly marketed to kill mites and lice on canaries and parakeets with the warning that it be kept away from the birds' face and especially the eyes.

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TREE SPARROW RETURNS By Maurice Broun

Checking over my returns on Tree Sparrows, I was surprised to find that of a total of 104 bandings of this species, at Strawberry Hill Farm, during the winter of 1966-67, 17 (17.6%) had come back to us after a summer in Canada.

Then I recalled an experience with Tree Sparrows, years earlier. I banded a total of 60 Tree Sparrows at the home of our friends, Mr. and Mrs. C.B. Schaughency of Green Village, New Jersey, on the occasion of two visits: February 7 and March 14, 1954. The following winter, 21 (35%) of these birds had returned to the Schaughency's feeders - something of a record, I think!

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