

ISLAND BEACH SPRING PROJECT - 1969

By Bruce Adams

Inspired by the success of the pilot project in 1968, several banders this spring came to Island Beach State Park, New Jersey, to participate in the 1969 spring banding project, which again was under the direction of Dr. Kenneth W. Prescott of the New Jersey State Museum. Participating banders were Dr. Prescott, Trudy Prescott, Mr. and Mrs. Dave Corkran, Mr. and Mrs. Wally Kennison, Katherine Price and myself. Among the many able assistants who devoted their time were Tina Prescott, Lloyd Price, Marjorie Adams, and Pete Davis.

Banding was begun on March 22 and continued, mostly on weekends, through June 15. A total of 3,552 birds of 105 species was banded, in 5,076 net hours. There were 115 returns, many repeats, and one foreign recovery.

To anyone who has banded at I.B.O.R. in the fall, the most interesting features of the spring total sheet are the data which provide comparisons with the fall migration. These are all the more impressive for those who have actually been at Island Beach in the spring to see the flights. Comparisons can be made in the areas of individual species totals, family totals, visual observations, and weather as a factor in producing flights. (Space does not, alas, allow publication of the enormous and painstakingly prepared total sheet which accompanied this article; but fortunately, the author has summarized its highlights very thoroughly. -Ed.)

The season started on the weekend of March 22-23, during which I was the only bander. Although the numbers that weekend were not particularly impressive, it turned out that it was, numerically, the most productive weekend for a whole month. It also produced a couple of surprises - a Redpoll, the first ever banded at Island Beach, and two Saw-whet Owls. The latter turned out to be the only birds of prey banded the entire season, and the only other ones observed were local Ospreys and an occasional Sparrow Hawk. Here was one of the more noticeable differences between fall and spring; but one to be expected, as hawks are not usually seen in numbers along the coast in spring.

During April, I was able to spend an entire week at Island Beach from the 12th to the 18th. Although I had nets up every day, it turned out to be the slowest week I have ever spent at Island Beach, fall or spring. Birds of all varieties were almost entirely absent. At the week's end, when I drove to the EBBA meeting, it was interesting to learn from Betty Downs that Juncos and White-throated Sparrows had passed through her area of Vermont by the hundreds during the previous week, yet I had banded only one Junco and no White-throats. At the EBBA meeting I also had the opportunity to talk to Jim Baird, who explained to me what weather conditions would most likely produce coastal flights in the spring. His explanation,

briefly, is that while a fall flight will be produced simply by a cold front by itself, a spring flight will depend upon a warm front from the south being met by a cold front. The flight will be best if the meeting of the fronts takes place at night and somewhat north of the coastal area in question. An examination of weather maps for the week of April 12-18 shows clearly that such conditions did not exist, hence no flights. While the maps (from the New York Times) showed that these conditions did exist several nights in May, there were often heavy flights when these conditions were not present. Regarding wind direction and fall flights, I have long been of the opinion that the next best thing to a northwest wind is no wind at all. This seemed to hold true this spring, but only during May.

The first heavy flight came on the weekend of April 26-27, and from that time on almost every weekend produced a spectacular flight of migrants. By this time Kit Price, the Corkrans, and the Kennisons were down regularly on weekends and it is unfortunate that more banders could not have been there to see the flights. For photographic purposes alone, it is worth a trip down, as of course all the male birds are in beautiful spring plumage.

As in 1968, warblers of all kinds were predominant, and on most days outnumbered all other species combined. On some days the density of birds almost rivalled the huge fall Junco and sparrow flights. On May 13, with my sister helping me, I banded 345 birds and could have banded even more; of these, all but 47 were warblers of 17 species. Even more interesting were the totals of different species. Some warblers, such as Tennessee, Nashville and Cape May, were in very small numbers compared with the fall; while others, such as Parula, Magnolia and Black-and-white, were in proportionately larger numbers. The Parulas in particular were very impressive, and it is interesting to compare some statistics with the fall totals.

The average yearly fall total of Parulas is 67 (in 13 years); the average for the "highest Parula day" of each fall is 15. Yet this spring we banded 114 with far fewer banders and net-hours than in the fall. The May 4 total was 54 with three banders, 25 nets and 208 net-hours; the all-time highest daily fall total in 13 years, September 23, 1961, was 60 Parulas with ten banders, 72 nets and 811 net-hours. I have no idea why this particular warbler should be so abundant in the spring.

Some warblers, such as the Redstart, seemed to be in about equal numbers with the fall. Still another warbler mystery was the fact that almost all Palm Warblers were Yellow Palms, outnumbering the Western Palms by about the same degree as they are outnumbered in fall by Westerns. This so surprised me that I checked with skins at the American Museum of Natural History to make sure I was not misidentifying them, but the skins confirmed it: they were almost all Yellow Palms.

With other families of songbirds, the general impression was that although the variety was as great as in the fall, the overall numbers were

somewhat less. Woodpeckers were well represented as to species, but there was nothing approaching the big Flicker and Sapsucker flights of the fall. The high total of Red-bellied Woodpeckers, incidentally, was probably not peculiar to spring migration but due to the fact that this was in "invasion" year for these birds in the northeast. In addition to the three banded, possibly six others were observed.

Vireos, flycatchers and thrushes also came in good variety but in generally smaller numbers than in the fall. Two species which far outnumbered their fall totals were Hummingbirds (which we did not band) and Blue Jays. Although Blue Jays are generally scarce in the fall, they were very numerous all during May, with large flocks of up to 50 or 60 continually flying up and down the island. Most were above the nets or bounced out of them, yet we banded 23, higher than any fall total except 28 in 1966.

Aging and sexing showed somewhat predictable data. Among birds in which the males could be separated as to SY or ASY (Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Towhee, Redstart and a few others), a great majority were SY. Just as the HY birds predominate in the fall, it seems also that the youngest or SY birds appear at the coast in spring. With regard to sex, in most cases, especially warblers, males arrived about one week before females.

As in the fall, the direction of flight is almost entirely northward, especially during the heaviest flight hours in the morning. In fact, the activity of the birds during the heavy flights is almost a duplicate of their behavior during the fall. Almost all birds are on the bay side of the road, moving north, with the greatest concentration near the bay edge. In two net lanes (A-2 and A-5), at least, the nets which were most productive in the fall were the same ones that were most productive in the spring.

The 115 returns were as follows: Whip-poor-will 1, Towhee 7, Song Sparrow 17, Hairy Woodpecker 1, Downy Woodpecker 3, Carolina Chickadee 4, Brown Thrasher 2, Yellow Warbler 1, and Yellowthroat 27. Among the most interesting were the Whip-poor-will, which was banded in 1965; a seven year old Towhee; and a six year old Catbird.

The foreign recovery was a Catbird, 64-133309, banded at Fire Island, New York on August 9, 1968 by Richard Kane and trapped by the Corkrans on May 30, 1969.

During slower days I found time to put up some 4-inch mesh nets which always produced such interesting "extras" in the fall. My efforts were rewarded with two Green Herons, one Woodcock, one Black Duck, and one Fish Crow.

Dr. Prescott plans to continue the spring project again this year. Any banders who would like to participate are urged to contact him for further information. If it is like 1969, it is an experience not to be missed.