



July-August

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
Ralph K. Bell

6 August 1970..... When I checked our Sparrow Hawk box today, I found that the lone nestling had died perhaps a week or so before. When I climbed up to the box to band the young on 10 June, I was shocked to find only one downy young. Its left leg stuck out at right angles to his body. I could return the leg to its normal position but when released it would immediately snap back to its abnormal position.

The Sparrow Hawk box was visited again on 12 July, with members of the Brooks Bird Club who were here for an outing. The young hawk could be heard giving its typical "killy-killy-killy" call as I reached the box. It was fully feathered but the leg which formerly stuck out at its odd angle on 10 June was now curled around so that the foot stuck up over the back and the right leg was now sticking out at right angles to the body.

The history of that box dates back to March 1957. On the 25th of that month, I captured a male and a female Sparrow Hawk in a Starling trap in our yard near one of the Purple Martin boxes. This was a good indication they were looking for a nesting cavity, so I immediately put up a suitable box about 30 feet in a live Wild Cherry tree which grew on top of the hill above our house. A few branches were cut away to make the box visible and within three days a pair of Sparrow Hawks indicated that they would use it for their nesting site.

Evidently, Sparrow Hawks have a very strong tendency to return to the same nesting site, as this box has been used every year. I seldom bother them except to band the young, but one year I did take the adult female out before the eggs had hatched and found she had been

caught during a snow storm (in one of my sparrow traps) and banded over two years before. The following table shows the number of young banded in the box each year. The reason for the average decrease in the number of young is not evident at this time.

Year	Date Banded	No. banded	Year	Date Banded	No. banded
1957	June 16	5	1964	June 9	4
1958	June 11	4	1965	June 4	4
1959	June 4	5	1966	June 5	4
1960	June 10	5	1967	June 2	3
1961	June 20	4	1968	June 4	3
1962	June 13	5	1969	June 1	4
1963	June 5	5	1970	-----	0

All people who claim chemicals are harmless should have seen that malformed young hawk in the box this summer. Even then, I doubt if some would be convinced - either through stubbornness or possibly monetary gain. I am amazed at the statements of responsible people despite all the scientific data available, which shows what is happening to our environment due to insecticides. A good example are some remarks by one of the staff members of the PENNSYLVANIA FARMER: "The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture voluntarily discontinued the use of D.D.T. in 1964 after the eggheads stirred up some scare headlines.....it is time we balanced up the greater need for saving thousands of acres of woodland against the possible damage to a couple of Golden Eagles". In another issue, people who were trying to save our environment were called "pseudo-conservationists" and "conservation nuts"....."they worry more about pigeons than people anyway."

It is encouraging to note that the state of New Jersey has been trying to make an honest effort to control the gypsy moth without destroying the environment in the process. 35,000,000 parasites which prey upon this pest were distributed throughout New Jersey this year. These included one parasite which attacks the egg, four which attack the larval form and one which attacks the pupae. A predacious beetle which feeds on the adult gypsy moth was also distributed.

It has been found that biological control is really working in alfalfa fields where formally spraying with insecticides was "the thing to do" no matter what its effect on our environment. Entomologists have discovered that a tiny parasitic wasp really keep the alfalfa weevil under control and spraying is not necessary anymore. This shows what can be done if the public outcry becomes loud enough.

Since we live on a farm, we did not need to be convinced about the bad consequences of chemical poisons - using ones eyes was enough. Before I knew better, I used DDT on our chicken houses (where there is spilled feed under the wire floors) and watched mice die from the "shakes". No spraying has been done in our chicken houses since and fly

numbers are far lower due to the vigilance of the Barn Swallow. Fly larvae parasites and Swallows are doing a far better job than sprays ever did.

While a lot is known about the ill effects of insect sprays, not much is known about herbicides which could be to blame for the crippled young Sparrow Hawk. There is a very bad thistle, known as the Canadian Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*. Ed.) that has been slowly spreading on our farm. I try to keep the tops mowed off so they will not go to seed. This controls most thistles but not the Canada Thistle since it can spread by the root system. After over 20 years of trying to check its spread, I decided to call in a spray outfit and had about five acres sprayed with 2, 4-D ethyl ester weedkiller. The area sprayed was under some electric wires where the adult Sparrow Hawks like to perch and watch for mice.

At one time herbicides were supposed to be safe where warm blooded animals were concerned (but so was DDT) and just this summer, Senator Gaylord Nelson, D. Wis., told the Senate that one defoliant 2, 4, 5T has been blamed for birth defects in laboratory rats, mice and chickens and may have similar effects on humans. If this is the case, it would appear that I am to blame for our Sparrow Hawk nesting failure this summer.

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