MORE ON SKULLING - By Emil J. Berger, Jr.

Bob Yunick spoke at EBBA's 1970 annual meeting about the inadvisability of using various agents for wetting a bird's feathers during skulling. He has since followed these remarks with an article published in the March-April EBBA NEWS in which he examined the pros and cons of the various agents in common use.

It was Bob's recommendation to use plain water in skulling because ordinary detergents and surface-active agents are persistent. That is to say, when the water in which they are dissolved evaporates, the agent itself is left on the bird's feathers and skin. Subsequent wetting, as by rain, redissolves these non-volatile residues. These residues may have been distributed over the bird's skin by means of preening or other mechanisms, reducing the effectiveness of the bird's natural oils in waterproofing the plumage. To restate Bob's conclusion: The survival potential of the bird is altered.

After hearing Bob's comments at Albany, I was dismayed. I had no wish to damage my birds, but it is a fact that plain water is not as helpful in skulling as is a solution of surface-active agent in water. The oily feathers don't wet with plain water.

Being naturally inclined to be lazy, I hated to give up anything which made work easier. What I did was begin a search to find a surfactant which was non-persistent and left no residue of any kind.

My quest was succesful. I found my material in the technology of the optical industry. Before applying an anti-reflection coating to a lens, or putting a reflection coating on a mirror, the opticians go to great lengths to make the base surfaces perfectly clean. The old method was to use hot chromyl-sulfuric acid. Now, the Air Reduction Company, of 150 East 42nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10017, has come up with a detergent called SURFYNOL 61 for this application. It is completely voletile, evaporating completely and leaving no residue behind.

I have tested solutions containing several proportions of this material on dead birds. After complete drying following initial wetting with the test solution, the feathers do not re-wet with plain water.

A weak solution, 1/2 to 1%, in water was used on every bird I banded last fall. None showed evidence of smarting or discomfort, even if the liquid got in their eyes. I felt no sting when I applied the solution to a cut in the skin of my hand.

No information on toxicity is available to me, however, I am alive and well after using it all season. As to the birds' health, I cannot comment, other than to say that some of the residents I banded last fall are being retrapped this spring. They can't be too unhealthy.

On the basis of these limited and not-too-rigorous tests, I am going to continue to use SURFYNOL 61 solution for skulling.

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