

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
Ralph K. Bell

June 14, 1968... After a very busy day, our son David and I left home this evening for one of the big events of the year - the Brooks Bird Club Foray and it was held this year at Camp Pocahontas near Bartow, West Virginia. Instead of the usual one week affair, this one was to be for two weeks - the first two-week Foray in the 29-year history of this annual event. While some of the lucky ones were there for the full time, Dave and I were only able to make it for the second week.

There is a reminder in the bulletin giving information about the Foray that says "get plenty of rest now - you will need it". What an understatement! There is so much going on all the time that there isn't much time for sleeping (if one doesn't want to miss anything). The day starts around 3 am. when the campers taking part in the Breeding Bird Surveys and the Population Area Studies, dress by flashlight and fix a snack before starting out. For those not taking part in the early morning activities, there was a morning bird walk each day at 6 am. with breakfast following this at eight o'clock. Then came the "morning sessions" with specialists giving excellent talks and demonstrations on such topics as geology, flowers, ferns, mosses, fungi, etc.

After the noon meal there were the scheduled field trips that are so popular with most of the campers. Areas visited this year included Blister Pine Swamp, Sinks of Gandy, Judy Spring, Spruce Knob (elevation 4,860 feet and the highest point in West Virginia), Radio Center with its "Big Ear", and of course Gaudineer, where so many so-called northern species are found. These include the Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Red Crossbill, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning Warbler, Swainson's Thrush, and that marvelous little songster, the Winter Wren. One would wonder how such a small bird would be able to pour forth such a loud melody that seems to contain the very spirit of the wild and untamed wilderness. Anyone that has never heard this tiny mite on its nesting grounds is really missing something great.

Each evening there was usually a song session with the one and only Doc. Burtt at the piano. Ben Kiff was such a wonderful song leader that those song sessions will be long remembered by many of those there. Then, a movie or slide program on some subject pertaining to nature. Next came the campfires that are such a tradition at each Foray. After campfire each evening a group of hearty campers would go with Joe Rieffenberger and Bob Kletzley to try and capture and band Woodcock in the nearby valleys. Then back to camp by 1:30 am. and a nap before the alarm clocks went off again.



Song leader Ben Kiff and piano player Harold Burtt getting tuned up for action at the Foray. (Photo by Dr. Art Rybeck.)

EBBA members that attended the Foray were very active, as usual. Dr. George Hall took time out from his busy schedule and came for the opening day. He gave a talk on the birds that might be found and produced a list of the 135 species that had been noted previously in the area. Mr. and Mrs. George Ballentine were camp photographers; Connie Katholi helped with the banding and the Breeding Bird Surveys; Maxine Kiff helped with the Nesting Bird Project and the Breeding Bird Surveys; Anne Shreve assisted with the banding and the Breeding Bird Surveys; Carol Rudy participated in the Breeding Bird Surveys and the Population Census Studies; Betty Vossler helped with the Foray Bird Project; Dr. Ben Burtt assisted with the Breeding Bird Surveys and gave a hawk banding demonstration by banding Red-shouldered Hawk nestlings; Ben's father Dr. Harold Burtt not only played the piano at all the singing sessions, but was head of listing all the mosses found in the Foray area; Chuck Conrad was Foray Director - "the big boss"; Jack Linehan was in charge of all the Breeding Bird Surveys, of

which there were 12 in the approximately 650 square mile Foray area, and this could be one of the most concentrated studies of its kind in the entire United States. Clark Miller was "boss" of the banding, and John Morgan was head of the Mammal Survey.



Left: The Foray camp bird list (total, 126 species).
Right: Carol and Martin Rudy birding at the Foray - Carol has always drawn the fine headings for this column. The Rudy's are excellent birders too.

June 30... Two English visitors here this evening, Jack and Audrey Bailey. Jack is a real birder and former bander, having banded for the London Natural History Society up to about 18 years ago when he entered the British Navy. He is at present studying American methods of selling and production at the Heinz plant in Pittsburgh, Pa. Jack reminded me of Chan Robbins - not only in build but by his exuberance. He has been in this country only since last October and has already listed over 320 species of American birds and many have been seen on weekends. They will go almost anywhere over a weekend to see a new species. One weekend they went to Michigan to see the Kirtland's Warbler...and they found it too. The main interest here was the Bewick's Wren and the Barn Owl and with luck perhaps the Dickcissel and Lark Sparrow. We drove to the Love's Hill area where I had seen a family of Bewick's Wrens in an old orchard a few days ago. The wrens were still there. The Bailey's were not satisfied with merely a look and they studied them for at least 20 minutes. We then came back to the farm and climbed the tree where the Barn Owl was flushed from the box when the EBBA group stopped here after the Wheeling

meeting, on April 7. Jack got to see the (one) half-grown owl in the box. For some reason none of the other eggs had hatched.

I told Jack he was a year late to see the Dickcissel and the Lark Sparrow - the latter had not been recorded here for many years. He asked me to be on the lookout for the above species and has since called twice by phone to ask if any had been found. I asked him why he was so impatient to find these two species and he said that time was short and that they must return to England in April. Jack's closing comments over the phone were in typical English accent as he remarked "we'll be 'popping in' to see you again one of these days". I might add that before Jack knew he was coming to America he had driven over 300 miles once to see one of the three American Robins recorded in England.

July 7... Have decided to write something about banding adults on the nest but realize that this could be a very controversial subject. No doubt most banders have noticed that some birds are more reluctant to leave their nests than others. Will these adult birds ever leave their nests if banded? My answer is no if the adult on the nest is not surprised by quick and unsuspected movements and there is not a struggle to capture the bird (in other words, if the bird is not unduly frightened). Today, I walked slowly up to a Mourning Dove's nest to see if the young were ready to band. The nest was chest high in an evergreen tree. The mother stayed on the nest (as they sometimes do) and this is when I started my experiment. I slowly moved my hand toward her. Each time as she stiffened and seemed ready to leave, I stopped all movement and waited a few seconds then gradually moved my hand forward. Finally, I grasped her firmly and lifted her off the half-grown young and banded her without the least bit of a struggle. She was released immediately and then the two young were also banded. I checked the next day and noted that the mother was back on the nest.

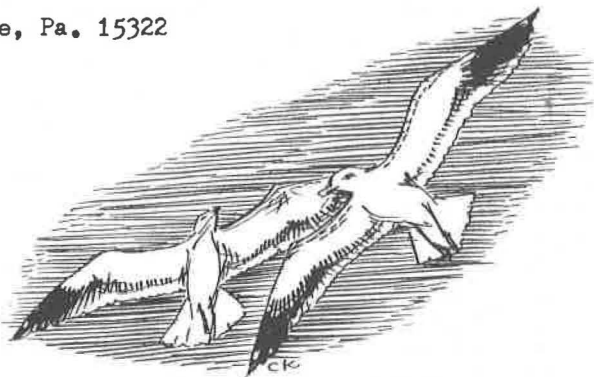
Also, this summer, when I opened one of my Purple Martin boxes to band the young, there were two adult males (presumably in the box to guard the young) that did not leave. They were easily picked up and banded without a struggle. In another instance this past spring I decided to lift a female Sparrow Hawk out of the nest box here on the farm and check for bands. I found that she had been caught and banded in a ground trap here two years before. There was no struggle as I had opened the door on the side of the box and she knew I was there. These examples are given to illustrate a point; there have been others.

I was very interested in Dr. Lewis Kibler's excellent article in the last issue of EBBA News about the hand trapping of adult Bluebirds in the nest box and the possibility of desertion. Dr. Kibler didn't say so, but I presume the three females that deserted were caught unaware of his presence beforehand and were unduly frightened. His suggestion of waiting to trap them after the young are hatched is a fine one as few birds will ever desert young.

However, I have noticed that if the mother Bluebird stays on the nest and eggs as the box is opened, there is absolutely no nest desertion if she is firmly lifted off the nest and banded. I started experimenting with adult female Bluebirds in 1965 when two were banded that seemed to be especially reluctant to leave their nests. Three were caught and banded in 1966 and one of these was recaptured this summer in the same box. This summer two female Bluebirds have been captured for the second time so one can see they were not excessively frightened when banded.

The temperament of each individual varies greatly - not only as to different species but within a species. But if we pick species upon which our presence would not likely increase predation and if good judgment is used, I see no reason why we should not pick up and band the adults that choose to remain on the nest.

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SEMPALMATED SANDPIPER RECOVERED IN LOUISIANA

By Kathleen S. Anderson

Since rather few shorebirds are banded and subsequently recovered, it seems worthwhile to report the recovery of a Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Ereunetes pusillus*) banded September 27, 1965 (band #56-23058) on Duxbury Beach, Plymouth County, Massachusetts. It was one of 31 Semipalmated Sandpipers banded and blood-sampled on that date by the Encephalitis Field Station, Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

The bird was found dead, impaled upon a barbed wire fence, in May of 1966 (no specific date recorded) on a farm in Eunice, Louisiana (in south-central Louisiana, approximately 60 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico). Mr. W.L. Morton, who reported the bird, wrote that it was probably one of two or three dozen "peep" that had been feeding with larger birds about a temporary pond in an open field after a heavy rain.

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