

AN UNUSUAL HOUSE FINCH

Walter Post Smith

The old saying, "Hindsight is better than foresight", applies as much to banding as to anything else, a fact of which I was most forcefully made aware recently.

On Saturday, January 27, 1973, I had opened a net at day-break, as usual, just outside the door to my backyard. I might mention, in passing, that I had placed this net rather sneakily (from a bird's point of view) between several feeders, so that as they moved from one feeder to another they frequently ended up in my net.

I was, at the time, basking in an unprecedented local invasion of Northern Finches--mostly Purple Finches along with quite a few House Finches. To properly relate this to my Finch-banding "norm", in 1970 I banded three House Finches, in 1971 five, in 1972 four and in 1973 eighty-two!

That particular morning I glanced out of the storm door at about 8:30 a.m., and noting about a dozen-or-so birds in the net, slipped into my jacket and grabbed a collecting box. As I was extracting my captures I noticed, in about the middle of the net, what appeared to be a very dark House Finch. When I got to the "dark one" my excitement surged--it was just too black to be a House Finch!

Since I perform the banding act in the comfort of our Kitchen (much to my wife's disgust on wet days!), I returned there to examine my find more thoroughly. This bird was of the same size and conformation as a House Finch, had that typical rounded upper mandible, but could only be described as brownish-black in color, had faint lengthways streaking on breast and belly that was much wider than in the House Finch, and its head appeared heavier than that of a House Finch. I requested my wife's help in identification and when she agreed that it was definitely "different", we went to the Books. Nothing seemed to fit exactly, but we felt the closest to which we could come in our references was the Black Rosy Finch---which, of course, has

a very restricted range in the Northern Rockies, and shouldn't be in our area at all!

I telephoned several of my banding friends. Rather typically, Dorothy Mitchell interrupted her busy day long enough to drive over for a look. She seemed to accept our identification prognosis and the two of us took a series of close-up pictures with our Instatech cameras. Not wishing to hold the bird overlong, I placed band number 112-195140 on its left leg and released it. I guess I had better explain at this point that I was using size "1B" bands on House Finches because the Finch invasion had completely exhausted my supply of sizes "1" and "0" bands, and my new order had not arrived from the Banding Office.

In the ensuing days, in retelling my experience to friends, little streamers of doubt began gnawing at my mind. Dr. Mitchell Byrd suggested the possibility of a melanistic House Finch. There was also the possibility of a hybrid of some kind to be considered. The more I thought about it the more I realized that I might not be qualified to make the identification and probably shouldn't have banded the bird!

When Dorothy's slides and mine had been processed, I was amazed to find that my pictures and hers were so different that one might suspect a completely different subject. I felt, with bias perhaps, that my slides looked much more like the bird, but was disappointed, since I hoped the slides could help an expert in identifying my "strange one".

About a month later I showed my pictures to Fred Scott during a Virginia Society of Ornithology outing to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Fred said he would like to send copies to Chan Robbins. He did so and later wrote me that Chan said although there was naturally some doubt, it was probably a melanistic House Finch.

It was at this point that I decided not to turn in my banding schedule on that individual until I could talk to some of the banders at the annual meeting of EBBA in April at Island Beach. Surely some of those people would have had a similar experience and be able to help me with my dilemma.

At the Island Beach meeting I pestered quite a few people, including some Banding Office personnel, with my tale--but apparently no one knew of a similar situation.

Having suffered through this rather humbling experience, I returned home and with some misgivings sent in my schedule, listing my "strange one" as a probable melanistic House Finch.

I write this in the hope that other banders may profit by the telling, and thus I come to the "hindsight" part of my tale: Should some whim of chance permit that same bird to return to my net in any future Winter, I am determined to collect him for positive identification.

--Walter Post Smith, 3009 Chesapeake Avenue, Hampton, Va. 23661

REVIEW

"Of Mosquitoes, Moths, and Mice"

By C. Brooke Worth
c. 1972

W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., New York, N.Y. 258pp. \$8.95.

Here is a delightful book which should be read by all persons who enjoy nature. The author, a Life Member of the Eastern Bird Banding Association, and an entomologist by profession, has the unique ability to make the inner secrets of nature with emphasis on behavior, readily understandable through his easy-going "armchair style" writing.

The story doesn't only deal with the families mentioned in the title, but gives a finely balanced ecological picture of those and ecologically related families of birds and turtles. That picture is both factual, very informative to the reader, and humorous.

The site of his investigations is at his farm at Delmont, N.J., a place infested with mosquitoes; thus, it could not have been a better research area for an entomologist. Brooke Worth has the envious ability to realize that there's something worth noting in the behavior of all the creatures on his farm and he takes the

reader on a step-by-step guided tour, sharing his delights with us.

In this reviewer's opinion, what Niko Tinbergen is to the Herring Gull, Brooke Worth is to the mosquitoes, moths, mice, birds and other creatures on his farm.

(Reviewed by Fred Schaeffer)

WALTER P. NICKELL
1903 - 1973

On January 2, 1973, Walter P. Nickell, Ph.D., a longtime member of EBBA, passed away, at the age of 69.

An avid birder since his teens in the Kentucky Woodlands, watched with love the broods of wild turkey, caught the flash of the cardinal and the Baltimore Oriole, learned to recognize the great horned owl and all the birds found in the land where he grew up. Spending his early teens in his father's camp as a lumberjack and a cook, he entered High School at age 17. He finished High School in two and a half years and college in about the same time, and earned his B.A. degree from Kentucky Wesleyan College. He has worked in New York as a social worker, became a high school principal in the southern mountains of Kentucky.

In 1935, Walter Nickell joined the Cranbrook Institute of Science, where he was employed since. He has been an aspiration to the youth and to conservation. He has given his time generously and with devotion to his work.

In 1964, he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, by Central Michigan University.

Walter Nickell, as bander, naturalist, conservationist, lecturer and writer, has banded 200,000 birds of almost 400 species during his work. He has published over 100 articles in the Wilson Bulletin, The Auk, The Jack-Pine Warbler, American Midland Naturalist, The Ring, Bird-Banding, and many more.