

BACKYARD WHIP-POOR-WILLS

By Charlotte M. Wood

Referring to the whip-poor-will, it is written in BIRDS OF AMERICA (Pearson et al., 1936) that "Comparitively few people can say that they have ever had more than a fleeting glimpse of the bird, while a great many more have never seen it at all; and probably never will." This statement is reflected in the sparse number of whip-poor-wills banded in the East in 1971 as reported by EBBA NEWS (August 1972, Volume 35, No. 3), a total of 27 and none of these in New Jersey. However the bird's distribution is widespread throughout the East as well as the rest of North America. The paradox is intriguing and my interest was spurred when I netted a whip-poor-will on May 8th of this year (1973).

I operate a small banding station in the backyard of my home in north central New Jersey, 25 miles west of New York City. It consists of a large walk-in ground trap and one 12 meter mist net. The surrounding region is largely residential suburbs, typical of the greater metropolitan area. Large trees are numerous, and the Watchung Reservation, a large forested recreational area, is within a mile. On a typical spring day I band 10-20 birds, mainly Blue Jays, Grackles, and Mourning Doves that feed in the ground trap, and an occasional Warbler or Sparrow in the mist net. I am in the habit of closing the mist net at night due to the abundance of cats in the vicinity. However, on this particular May evening I neglected to do so until 10 P.M., at which time I found a male AHY Whip-poor-will caught. I feel that this bird represents a significant event, in the light of the scarcity of whip-poor-will banding in the East. Also it seems that this is not necessarily a rare, isolated event. Nine years ago at this same backyard station, another whip-poor-will was netted (D.L. Wood, pers. comm.). According to Birds of America, whip-poor-wills "do not hesitate to approach human habitation..." and this certainly was true of the two trapped in the yard, being caught within 50 feet of the house. Though nine years may appear a long time between whip-poor-will bandings, I should point out that relatively little banding has been done here between that time and now. Less than 110 birds per year were banded here since then. This leads me to raise the question of whether whip-poor-wills may possibly be flying past many banders' homes at night and past their closed mist nets, even in the very populous areas. Perhaps a significant increase in whip-poor-will bandings would occur if mist nets were left open later in the evening.

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