



A Bird Bander's Diary

BY

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Nearly everyone, especially banders, has noted occasional migration disasters. These may take the form of massive kills against buildings, TV towers, or lights. On occasion the weather is the destructive agent. Such weather caused disasters are usually more wide-spread and cover a longer period of time therefore causing results that are harder to interpret.

Along the coast of eastern Maine we have had large "kills" during the spring migration in two of the past three years. The first of these, occurring on May 21, 1972, had the ocean itself as the major cause of death. Until the night of 20-21 May there had been a fairly steady northward flow of migrants. Icterids and sparrows had already passed northward and the warblers and other small passerines were coming through in numbers on a nightly schedule. On the night of the 20th there had been a steady southerly flow of air resulting in a dense bank of low fog along the entire Maine coast. About midnight a mass of cooler air had begun pushing offshore. For some reason this cooler air remained above the fog bank. Apparently the northward moving migrants, cut off from views of the ground below, did not detect that they were being pushed further and further eastward by the flow. At sunrise on the morning of the 21st when the migration of that night dropped down to the ground it found itself over water.

No birders had a chance to see what happened but there were quite a few lobstermen working offshore that morning who did. One fellow who often gave me reports of unusual sightings he had made reported that there were 50 to 100 small birds in sight and attempting to land on his boat at any given instant. They would land anywhere, on his head, parts of his body, and equipment. Several fell exhausted into the wet bilges while others attempted, in their confusion to land on moving lines attached to the traps as they came in over the side. Several birds were seen trying to land on bits of foam and fell into the water. Gulls, which are always around the boats, were having a feast. They would catch the passerines on the wing or boldly walk on board the boat and pick up the weak, scarcely able to move individuals.

This was not an isolated incident. The airwaves were filled with reports from other lobstermen and draggers concerning the numbers of birds coming on board their vessels. As near as I could determine,

this same thing happened to about 400 boats stretched along 120 miles of coast between Cutler and Rockland.

This incident of birds being blown offshore did not have a lasting or even observable effect on the population that summer as near as can be determined. My net species and numbers per net hour remained close to the average for that time. In fact, on the morning of May 21, I caught 90 birds of 31 species in a very light fog with blue sky and sun overhead. The spring of 1973 had no noted migration kills but in the spring of 1974, we had another bad disaster.

The migration this past spring was coming along fine when on the morning of May 20, the day started with a cool, northeast wind and light rain. This in itself was not bad but the next day also was cold and wet. Winds were a steady 15 to 20 mph from the east northeast. About dark on the 21st, I noted a large number of birds congregated around my feeders. On Wednesday the 22 the weather was the same. Temperatures were a constant 40-42 degrees both day and night. Some of the insectivorous migrants were beginning to feel the pinch of an insectless period. All throughout Wednesday I had a steady stream of students coming to my door to report "strange acting" birds which were fluttering against windows of various rooms. Several dead and weakened Cape May Warblers were brought in.

Thursday the 23rd and Friday the 24th were identical in weather. On Thursday, 12 dead warblers were found around my school building. I had three species of warblers, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, and Yellowthroat, were seen clinging to my suet bags all at once. On Friday a northward moving flight of Scarlet Tanagers suddenly found that they had over-reached their food supply. In southern Maine and further south into N.H. and Mass., many hundreds of these birds suddenly appeared on roads, streets, lawns, and doorways in exhausted condition. There were many radio and newspaper accounts of these brilliant scarlet birds. No mention of the females was made. Either they had not been migrating along with the males or else the newsmedia did not know how to identify them. One person with whom I had a chance to interview reported that there appeared to be a male tanager for every 100 yards of the Maine Turnpike for 124 miles. All of the birds seen were sitting on the edge of the tar, unmoving but alive.

On Saturday the 25th the weather was unchanged. All insect eating birds had vanished from open areas where rain and wind were unbroken. The disconcerting thing was that when one went into a sheltered area near small woods and ponds there were no concentration of birds there either. Quite a few species were being found in some locations but not in great numbers. A birding Big Day held on that Saturday in rain observed 174 species, a new record high for one 24 hour period in the state.

Sunday the 26th was the seventh day of overcast and cold rain. A recording thermometer had measured a high of 44 degrees and a low of 38 during the past seven days. A few warblers were still to be seen, but these were only the more hardy types such as Myrtles or smaller deep-brush birds like the Yellowthroat. A person who had never noted birds

before and who had, in fact, scoffed at my interests came to be all atwitter like the stereotyped grandmother because as he had been sitting on a stream bank trying his luck at a very overflowing trout stream had had a Blackburnian Warbler, male, alight on his toe as he was fishing. Not only did this fellow get a very good look at the bird, but it flew from his foot hawking some unseen spot in the air and then returned to his toe to spend a minute or two preening.

On Monday the 27th the weather was still unchanged and a fellow brought me an extremely bedraggled mass of black and orange feathers for identification. There were the remains of a male Redstart taken from the stomach of an eel in Graham Lake. It would be nice to report that finally everything dawned clear, which of course it did sooner or later, but not until Thursday, May 30th. Then it cleared with a strong cold NW wind and temperatures in the mid forties only. After it cleared it was different than after other storms which last for one or two days. A walk around the property found no birds as there had been only 10 days before. The bushes were silent and my nets on the first of June had 21 birds with only 2 warblers.

Although major weather kills like this are perfectly natural, their function of thinning out a population could be nothing but detrimental at a time when bird populations are in trouble due to other environmental problems. A migrating warbler from South America, which has just seen most of its wintering habitat destroyed leaving nothing for it to return to, does not need to have half its population wiped out at its northern grounds. Of course, this is nature's way of reducing numbers so that there will be a smaller number to occupy the decreased area of the wintering grounds this coming winter. The species will probably survive but in numbers so reduced that it will be observable to birders and banders in the northern hemisphere. If any good could be found in the weather kill of May 1974, it is simply because many people were suddenly made aware of birds. The unusual tameness of a starving bird allowed many who had never seen a bird close-up to get that opportunity. As a bander, however, I am more alert to survival factors and I felt that this spring was a major disaster to our bird population which is noticeable in the fall banding and may possibly be noted for several seasons to come.

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IN PURSUIT OF THE SHORT-EARED OWL

By G.C. Meleney

The first week in August, 1974, a man got off the ferry at Vineyard Haven, Marthas Vineyard, and looked about him. His binoculars were in a prominent position on his chest. He approached the nearest taxi man. "I want to see the Short-eared Owl," he said. "I read that it is here on the island. Do you know where I can find it?" "No, I don't", my nephew said, "But I know some one who probably does. She is a bird-bander." With that he gave the man my telephone number.