

STRAYS AND STRAGGLERS

By John V. Dennis

Part I

One of the first rules in natural history is to accept the obvious explanation only after finding that all other alternatives are unacceptable. There are few obvious answers when it comes to studying bird migration. Looking at one aspect of migration -- the appearance of birds long distances from areas generally conceded to be the bird's range -- we generally have one fairly obvious explanation to offer as well as a number of obscure alternatives.

Almost any daily weather map will show disturbances that, with imagination, can be assigned as the reason for the appearance of almost any stray anywhere. I feel sure that my weather theorist friends are right most of the time when, as they so often do, they find a particular weather situation that seems to wrap up very neatly whatever the season has to offer in the way of strays. While the weather factor is almost indisputable in many, many instances, I would like to suggest, nevertheless, that not all strays are to be accounted for by the weather and that there are at least one or two obscure reasons that fit certain situations better, to my mind, than the common weather explanation.

Although the bird-bander finds a surprising uniformity in the way individual birds return to exactly the same yard in winter or the same nesting site in summer, there are at the same time distinct changes going on within bird populations. Even within a period of a few years we can see evidences of change, such as range expansion or shrinkage, populations becoming more sedentary, shifts in the breeding or winter range. The workings of evolutionary processes may be the fundamental reason behind some of these changes while others seem to come about through the ability of birds to adapt to new situations. In their recent most interesting book The Senses of Animals and Men, the Milnes (p. 220) suggest that mutations in Monarch butterflies provide the answer why populations of these butterflies are found in New Zealand and in the West Indies. While an inherited sense of direction takes Monarch butterflies southwest from eastern Canada in fall or due south from British Columbia, supposedly mutant populations have headed in other directions and, in some cases, have formed colonies long distances from the home range.

Before checking into the possibility that some of our stray birds might be mutants with a new inherited direction, I would like briefly to mention the matter of imprinting. Conrad Lorenz has described the way in which animals of many kinds accept foster parents, even accepting man himself, if the image of the foster parent is "imprinted" at a young enough age. Imprinting is beginning to be applied to other areas of animal behavior. An interesting comment by Robert J. Newman in Audubon Field Notes: 15(3), p. 335, 1961, concerns Broad-winged Hawks wintering in the central Gulf states. He wonders if immatures recorded the previous

winter "became 'imprinted' to that region instead of the normal winter range in the deep tropics and, now molted into adult plumage, they consider Louisiana and Alabama their southern goal." There are no weather factors involved in his speculation. The birds, according to the theory, happened to be in the Gulf coast area during the brief receptive period of their first autumn when imprinting would cause a lifelong adherence to the area.

In the same issue of Field Notes (p. 344) there is mention of a Black Phoebe, "presumably the same individual" that returned to winter quarters on Galveston Island for the third consecutive year. This species, a resident of the Southwest, including west Texas, occasionally wanders eastward to central Texas in winter. The individual in question may have actually been carried beyond its intended goal the first year by strong winds, but hardly the second and third year. The second and third returns seem to fall nicely within the imprinting concept.

Indeed, looking through back issues of the Field Notes and elsewhere, one finds a fair number of records where there is implied or proven return by a "stray" over one or more seasons to the locality where it was first seen. Black-headed Grosbeaks have provided a number of interesting records. Apparently the first well established record east of the Mississippi was a bird at the Olive Rhines feeder in Glastonbury, Conn. during the winter and spring of 1953. Mrs. Rhines banded this bird, but writing in the Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, April 1953, she states that a second bird appeared briefly on March 3 and that she saw enough of it to believe it too was a Black-headed Grosbeak. During the winter of 1956-1957 a Black-headed Grosbeak was present in Glastonbury and was banded by Lee Jay Whittles. Could this second bird have been the one Mrs. Rhines saw in March 1953? The Central Southern Region, Field Notes: 12(3), 1958, provides an unusual wealth of records of out-of-range birds returning another year. Black-headed Grosbeaks returned "to at least two of the exact localities where the species was recorded for the first time in the 1956-1957 season." Also a Bullock's Oriole, "believed to be the same individual", returned to the same feeding station in Hackberry, Louisiana for the sixth successive season.

Turning to California, we find in the Field Notes: 11(1), 1957, an account of a banded Virginia's Warbler that returned for the third successive year to a yard. Also there are two Field Notes' records of Painted Redstarts coming back to the same winter localities for three successive seasons. Both the Virginia's Warbler and the Painted Redstart are of only casual occurrence in southern California where these records occurred.

In my article Western Birds at Eastern Feeding Stations, Audubon Magazine: 55(5), 1953, I discuss two West Coast occurrences of Harris'

Sparrows at feeding stations. One, a bird in Pomona banded by Mrs. N. Edward Ayer, came back for four successive winters, and the second near Portland, Oregon came back for three seasons. On its second stay the Oregon bird was accompanied by another Harris' Sparrow. In my article I asked whether the West Coast strays returned each spring to their northern breeding grounds west of Hudson Bay or simply followed the crowned sparrows, with which they associate, northward. On the basis of present knowledge, I would say that loyalty to the ancestral breeding grounds is stronger than that to the ancestral winter range. Not only does it seem likely that these stray birds must return to their breeding grounds, but that on return visits to a new out-of-range wintering locality they very likely at times bring others of their kind with them. Whatever the case, certainly Harris' Sparrow is increasing as a visitor to the West Coast. Field Notes: 10(3), 1956, lists the species at no less than five localities in southern California during the winter of 1955-1956.

Other examples of the return of strays or stragglers, or whatever we may want to call them, could be cited. Needless to say, it is of great importance for banders to capture such birds both for banding and positive identification. Such birds should be looked for again the following season and if there is a return, every effort should be made to establish positive verification.

(to be continued)

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PAPERS -- SPEAKERS FOR THE ANNUAL MEETING

Those members who desire to present banding or scientific papers at the 1963 Annual Meeting of the Eastern Bird Banding Association are urged to send information as soon as possible to the Program Committee Chairman, Rev. Garrett Detwiler, 285 Roseville Ave., Newark 7, N.J.

April 19-21, 1963 are the dates of the meeting, which will be held at Washington Crossing, Pa. The information you send to Rev. Detwiler should include your subject, the amount of time you require, whether you will present slides (size of slides, please) or other illustrative material, and whether you will need a projector, easel, blackboard, etc.

