

COMMENT ON "COMMENTS ON TRAPS"

By Daniel Smiley

Mabel Gillespie's thoughtful article in the March-April 1963 issue of EBBA News brings to mind lengthy discussions which John Emlen and I used to have while banding on the Haverford College campus. At that time we felt that there was a factor involved in catching birds in baited traps, which was not mentioned by Mrs. Gillespie. This might be called "the psychology of bird behavior" which is the bird's instinctive reaction to its immediate environment.

I was studying Song Sparrows at Haverford. This species spent much time in a certain shrub border at the edge of a lawn. I had traps on bare ground close to the shrubs. My observation was that the activity of these sparrows at any instant was the resultant of the interaction of two forces: the urge to get food and caution when away from the shrubs. A hungry bird would approach the bread bait (with which it was familiar). The further it went from the protection of the shrubs the more cautious it became. As a balance between these two drives was reached, the bird's reaction was to make little starts back toward the shrubs. Then, it would again head for the food.

The trap I was using was a single opening trip-thread. From observation of the bird's behavior I became convinced that which way the trap opening was pointed often made a difference as to whether the bird was caught or not. a) If the opening was toward the shrubs the bait would seem to be more readily visible to the bird, but as the point of balance between food urge and caution was reached the enclosure of the trap would throw the balance toward caution and the little sally back toward the shrubs would take the bird out of the trap. b) If the opening was away from the shrubs, once the balance was reached the resulting sally toward the shrubs would often take the bird into the trap. c) Another possibility would be to have the opening parallel to the line of shrubs or at some angle between this and #b.

All of this bird psychology as applied to trapping is not as simple as we would like to have it. The bird's reactions vary according to other external factors besides the two discussed above. One bird may be scared into a trap (or away from it) by another bird, depending which way the latter approaches. A combination of flock activity and hunger seems to make a difference in how readily birds enter traps. For instance during the height of the Junco migration this spring they readily entered all kinds of ground traps. Two weeks later at the end of migration when only a few individuals were at the banding station, they were very cautious about entering the same traps set in the same location with the same bait.

Just as with mammal trapping, some banders seem to have an intuitive ability to catch birds. Probably any of us can do a better job by taking thought, and especially trying to think like a bird. I have come to

believe that at times (and for many species) when birds are hard to catch, careful attention to where bait is placed in the trap is very important. When using chick feed for sparrows, how much is scattered outside can be a determining factor or a hindrance to success.

With a water-drip trap, especially a top opening one, as a chardon-neret, a curved stick stuck in the ground so that it forms a perch near the opening serves to keep the bird from alighting on the trap and possibly springing it before he is inside.

I feel that traps should be designed with bird "psychology" in mind. For many years I have used a clover-leaf trap of my own design with good success. In this the 3 "leaves" are egg shaped (large end out). Bait is placed toward the small end of each "egg" so that a bird reaching the wire from the general vicinity of the center of a leaf gets nearer the bait as he moves along the wire. A fourth pile of bait is put at the very center of the trap. This the bird sees through one of the entrances to the trap, at about the time he reaches the point on the periphery of the "egg" where he no longer gets closer to one of the first baits. There are other psychological features of this trap which could best be demonstrated with a model.

It seems to me that some of our ornithologists might be able to help us to better understand the psychology of bird behavior by acquainting us with the latest knowledge of the way birds sense their surroundings. How do birds react to wire mesh with different sizes and shapes of openings? Is the color of trip threads significant in making them less obvious to birds? Is it a waste of effort to use bread or other berries to bait traps in or under a mulberry tree?

I have raised more questions than I can answer. Some value may come of this, if banders are stimulated to think about how a bird may react in connection with traps and bait.

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68-TIME REPEATER NOW ALSO A RETURN
By Malcolm Oakes

This short story might be entitled "Persistent Grackle Comes Home". We called him "Dopey" because he came back to the same maze trap so often - 68 times between the day he was banded on June 18th and his last visit on August 13th 1961 - some times as many as four times the same day. By the time he left for parts unknown he was badly battered with no sign of a tail. On June 1st 1963 I thought that band number 683-96814 seemed vaguely familiar. Sure enough "Dopey" had returned in fine shape with his full male plumage but just as noisy and cantankerous as ever. I wonder where he spent the summer of 1962?

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