



Jan. - Feb.
A Bird Bander's Diary
 By Ralph K Bell



In the previous issue, a limited description of our area was given. This time perhaps I should complete the picture by listing personalities. First, there is Mrs. Bell - chief cook (an excellent one), lover of dogs, and head of the egg department here at the house; our daughter Joan - who graduates this summer from Robert Morris Junior College (Pittsburgh); our son David - a junior in the local high school and our chief egg washer; Casey - our Border Collie dog - chief chicken catcher and sheep herder; Jack - our Beagle hound that I call fatso to tease Mrs. Bell. She says it is a very undignified name, and wants me to call him shorty instead if I must give him a nickname.

January 8 When looking out the window today, I noticed a Cooper's Hawk walking around on the ground. About four years ago I had noticed the same thing. Evidently the other birds don't realize he is a hawk when on the ground, as they do not seem to be alarmed. But let him fly or sit in a tree and every bird is motionless or trying to reach the safety of the evergreens. Whether this hawk is able to catch any birds while on the ground, I have not yet been able to ascertain.

January 9 Eight new lambs this morning from four mothers, and what a job it is to get them straightened out and put in the lambing pens with the right mothers. They are put in individual pens for at least two days until everyone knows who is who (and the lambs are stronger). A mother ewe knows her own lambs by smell and puts up a terrible fuss if a wrong lamb is put in a pen with her. I just keep changing them around until everyone is happy. Some mothers have trouble having their lambs and need to be helped. They are a changed animal and quite docile at this time. They will look at you with such questioning and pleading eyes. It has been said that the reason sheep respond so much to care is because they have been domesticated longer than any other animal. The miracle of birth is something to behold, and if anyone ever had doubts of there being a higher power, they should witness the birth of baby lambs. They struggle to get up within two minutes. We have lambs in January for three reasons ... I have more time to care for them, the lambs do better in cold weather, and are ready for market in June when the price is highest.

January 13 Biggest snow of the year so far - eighteen inches of the beautiful stuff. Our wintering Bluebirds (six) slept in the Bluebird box in our yard to-night. On stormy or cold nights they seem to prefer

this box - probably because it is roomy (5"x6"). They have used this box other winters too. I always clean it out every fall and put in a two inch layer of grass to help give them warmth on zero nights. It doesn't take long for all of them to get in the box. This afternoon they came in from their feeding grounds across the valley and lined up on the electric wires at 3:40 p.m. Within five minutes they were all in the box for the night. I am always glad to see them use this box instead of sleeping under the eaves of the buildings where a Screech Owl may find them. I have found Bluebird feathers on the ground under these roosts.

January 29 Recorded a new bird in our yard today - the White-winged Crossbill. I first noticed it at 11:20 a.m. feeding on the Hemlock cones as I was going to the mailbox. I slowly backed away and ran to the house for my binoculars to be sure it was the Crossbill I had been looking for. They had been reported from the New England states last fall. In December, Mrs. Ralph Kent of Westerlo, New York (in writing about White-crowns) had commented about these Crossbills being in that area. Then Bernard Van Cleve of the Pittsburgh Audubon Society had told me by phone of them being seen in the Pittsburgh area. They were getting closer and I began checking Hemlocks within 20 miles as I delivered eggs to stores. What a pleasant surprise to find one in the yard. It proved to be unafraid and would allow me to approach within four feet. I went to get a net and while putting it up nine more came in from the surrounding evergreens. Two hit the net and were banded.

January 31 Six White-winged Crossbills here today. They were all on the ground eating the fallen Hemlock cones. While I was watching them they came to a patch of snow near me (in the shade of a small spruce) and all of them ate snow for at least a minute, proving that water is no problem in the frozen north. I put the net up and soon caught all six of them. Two were adult males, two sub-adult males and two were females or immatures. The fat classes were as follows: one fat adult male was given a rating of 3; three birds were classed as 2 and two birds were given a fat rating of 1. I wish now that I had checked them all to see which way their bills were crossed (and corresponding amount of fat). Of those checked, two had lower mandibles crossed to the right and the other one was crossed to the left.

February 5 My high school buddy Ralph Horn (who helped with my Barn Swallow studies) and I went to Deer Lake today. This lake is about 25 miles east of here on top of Chestnut Ridge of the Allegheny Mountain chain. We wanted to put up some Tree Swallow boxes before the ice melted and made things more difficult. I will comment further on this project at a later date.

February 29 Mrs. Bell and I went to the annual mid-winter meeting and banquet of the Brooks Bird Club. It was held at beautiful Oglebay Park near Wheeling, West Virginia. A wonderful group of birders were there. The following members of EBBA were present: Dr. Harold E. Burt; Mr. and Mrs. George Ballentine; Art Dunnell; Dr. George Hall; Carol Hand; Mrs. Wm. Katholi; Lloyd Kiff; Tom Olsen; and Ann Shreve.