

Nov. - Dec.



A Bird Bander's Diary

By Ralph K. Bell



Nov. 29 I left home early this morning with 3 of my deer hunting buddies for Smithport in northern Pennsylvania. We stay at a private home there (the Stickles homestead). This annual trek to the big woods country has been going on every fall for 20 years. Some EBBA members might deplore such things as deer hunting, but let me state that I am a devout conservationist and in defense of the average deer hunter, he is doing mankind and nature in general a service. Since the white man has killed off all of the wolves (they formerly kept the deer in check), deer can multiply so rapidly that an entire area can soon be denuded of lower vegetation. Other wildlife (including birds) suffer as a result. One look at the bare ground and the scrawny, diseased deer in an overpopulated fenced-in area is quite convincing.

There are other things to think about too. Here at our home in Greene County, I have never felt that deer were too plentiful and have helped buy up doe licenses to save at least some deer from the "meat hunters." I complained once to the local game warden here about the doe season. He answered by saying that some people think we have too many deer now, and he mentioned a couple of instances where cars were wrecked and one person injured when a deer jumped in front of cars at night.

Nov. 30 My main interest in deer hunting is the chance to spend some time in a vast remote forest area and enjoy nature at its best - the clear mountain streams, the majestic Hemlock trees, the massive rocks, and the chance to study the birds and animals that inhabit the area. Last year (Dec. 1963) Pine Siskins were abundant. This year it was the Goldfinch in flocks ranging up to perhaps 100 birds. They fed mainly on the heavy crop of Black Birch seeds. The Winterberry shrubs were loaded with beautiful red berries, and these were being eaten by Cedar Waxwings, and I heard one Robin. No Grosbeaks were heard this year, but a new bird for the area was heard croaking soon after daylight. It was far off, and I listened intently to be sure. It was a Raven all right and soon flew down the valley about one-half mile to the

east. I have observed them occasionally in Clearfield County (50 miles to the south), but this is my first record here. This evening, I asked my buddies if they had heard the Raven "croak" as it flew over their area. One said he had wondered if it were an "odd ball" Turkey. Another thought it might have been a hunter using some type of Crow call.

Grouse seemed plentiful this year, but Chickadees were scarce. It seems that Chickadees are often rather scarce after a big migration year like we had last fall (1963). Evidently starvation, hawks and accidents all take their toll. Porcupines are one of the more interesting animals we see. I have always marveled at the amount of cold weather they can stand. Their diet in winter is mainly the tender bark from a favorite tree near their den under some high rocks. A Porcupine is practically fearless, and the one I saw this year was about 30 feet above me and far out on a limb. It was constantly chewing off bark and would stop and look down only if I made a quick move. The noise made by the quick chewing motion sounded a lot like an old model sewing machine. This Porky had evidently fed on this tree all fall, as part of the main stem and many side branches were completely bare of any bark.

Dec. 2 Packing to leave for home this morning. We are all reluctant to leave such wonderful hospitality. I have stayed at the same home during deer season for the past 20 years. One learns a lot about a family during that length of time. I have shared their joys and sorrows; I have watched their five children grow and develop into responsible citizens. Mrs. Stickles has seemed like a second Mother to all of us. She does her best to cook things we like, and each meal is like a banquet. Evenings are spent watching TV, swapping stories and playing cards.

As we neared Greensburg on the way home, we spotted a group of society fox hunters dressed in the true regalia of their sport. They were all riding beautiful horses and following at least 20 hounds across an open field. One of my buddies remarked "they sure are a bunch of nuts." Careful now, I said, there are many people that consider us deer hunters a "bunch of nuts," and the rest agreed. Whenever I am talking to certain individuals, Rotary Clubs, etc., I stress the point that one group of people is apt to consider another group (with different interests and goals) as a little "odd." Birders can take heart by realizing this human trait. To keep from being branded as "odd," birders should have varied interests and thus be able to talk intelligently with people that have no interest in birds at all.

Dec. 27 This was the day selected a long time ago for our Christmas Bird Count. But what a day it turned out to be. We had rain, rain and more rain. John Morgan (who helped some at Red Creek) arrived at daybreak, as did EBBA member Lee Lowden from nearby Fayette County. There was a total of 11 observers in 5 parties. EBBA member Cora Williams

was supposed to help, but that 90 mile drive in heavy rain was just too much, and she called it off at the last minute. We only saw 37 species (43 last year) which wasn't bad, considering the rain and that some of our best birding territory was under water. We had a total of 37 Blue Jays (the most ever) and were able to find 28 Bluebirds. Cowbirds are rare here in winter, but we had 60 this year.

Please excuse me for a moment if I may become a little sentimental. Christmas time and the New Year are times to evaluate the past and look hopefully toward the future. I wish to thank everyone that sent us Christmas greetings. Each card contained a message and reflected the considerate personality of the sender. May I pick one and share its message with you.

Never a Christmas morning
Never the old year ends
But someone thinks of someone
Old days, old times, old friends.

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BANDING IN TRINIDAD

From a Letter to the Editor by LeRoy Wilcox

My wife and I have just returned (December) from a most enjoyable vacation spent at Spring Hill Estate (Mrs. Wright), a 200-acre cocoa plantation at Arima, Trinidad. See Sept-Oct, 1964 issue of Audubon Magazine for article by Don Eckelberry about this wonderful place.

Mrs. Wright allowed me to band birds there and in 20 days I netted and banded 65 species of which only 3 were U.S. species. Banded one of the young Oilbirds in the cave on the Estate, a Venezuelan Mionectes (only 3 other records for Trinidad), 8 species of Hummingbirds, White-bellied Martin, Spine-tailed Swift, Variegated Bittern, Blue and Yellow Tanager (probably the most beautiful bird I have banded out of some 280 species now banded.)

I have written Dr. Blake to see if he could give me a 20 minute spot in the program at next annual meeting to show slides of some of these birds of Trinidad.

Speonk, Long Island, New York



How are you planning to get to this year's EBBA annual meeting?