



Jan. - Feb.

A Bird Bander's Diary

by

Ralph K. Bell

January 1 Our game warden brought me a beautiful female Red-shouldered Hawk that had been caught by two toes in a trap set by a local fox trapper. This trapper said he had captured many hawks (even an Osprey) in years past, but had never seen one of this species before and had taken it to the game warden to find out what it was. The hawks were mostly caught in pole traps - a device I have talked against for years. In talking with the fox trapper, I tried to point out the importance of all hawks and owls in the scheme of things and now believe he views them in a different light.

The Red-shouldered Hawk is considered only a rare migrant in our area. There is only one nesting record for our county (Todd - "Birds of Western Pa.") and that was over 30 years ago. However, they could nest where this one was caught as the area is rather flat and swampy - the desirable habitat of the species. I have only banded 5 of these hawks and all but one were captured in February. One of these has an unusual history. This adult was first captured on Feb. 2, 1957, and taken that evening to the Brooks Bird Club meeting at Wheeling, W. Va., (60 miles away). It was brought back and released the next day. Exactly one year later this hawk was retrapped in the same Crow trap.

January 28 Snowing today and Starlings coming into the yard for food. There are lots of Starlings around this winter. This is unusual on the farm at this time of year and could be due to the rather mild winter and little snow. The thought of banding Starlings probably is nauseating to some banders, and you have my sympathy. I absolutely refused to band any Starlings before 1956 and shot all I could, and I must admit it seemed like a losing cause. I even kept box traps around just to catch Starlings and then disposed of them. Articles such as those written by Rev. G. S. Detwiler (EBBA News, May-June 1954) and John Dennis (EBBA News, Nov.-Dec. 1954) gradually softened my ire against the lowly Starling. Also, there is an old saying that "if you can't whip 'em - join 'em." My first Starling was banded June 1, 1956, and my knowledge of Starlings has increased tremendously. There have been 98 recoveries (2.5%) from 12 states and Canada. Apparently many of our summer Starlings migrate SW in the fall through southern Ohio and Kentucky

into Mississippi and Louisiana. There is some evidence to suggest the normal return trip in the early spring is slightly south and east of the fall route. Evidently flock association has its effect on some birds and these stop their spring migration in the approx. right latitude but the wrong longitude. There are 2 very interesting recoveries to illustrate this and suggests that the latitudinal urge may supersede the longitudinal urge. One of these Starling recoveries was a female banded April 19, 1960, and recovered in Indiana 38 days later (approx. 250 miles west of here) at almost exactly the same latitude. The other recovery was a male banded May 25, 1959, and recovered 25 days later in southern Mich. These recoveries were almost exactly at the same longitude - which may or may not be significant.

Anyone that wants recoveries should band Starlings, and it will help the F&W Service too. I wrote EBBA member Bob Mitchell (an old school friend now associated with the blackbird control section of the F&W Service) and asked if they still wanted EBBA members to band as many Starlings as possible. Bob's comments were highly favorable and stated that the aging and sexing by banders would help them greatly in their studies on migration and control measures. Over 90% of the Starlings (even immatures) can be sexed by eye color (brown iris in males, light colored ring in females) and older Starlings aged by hackle characteristics. In the spring the bluish rami also indicate a male. EBBA member G. Hapgood Parks had a fine article on this in the July, 1962, issue of Bird-Banding.

Box traps are very effective in the spring to catch Starlings, but something else must be used in the winter time. Rev. Detwiler's type of trap is very effective. Just sweep away some snow in a sheltered place in the yard. Then put some bread both inside and outside the trap and you are in business. If only 400 banders captured 500 Starlings each, the total would be 200,000 Starlings. The 5000 recoveries from these would help the F&W Service with their control problems. Every banded Starling helps, and some banders are even building large decoy traps (improved model described in new F&W Service leaflet). By using one of these traps, EBBA member B. P. Burt caught a fantastic 3,450 Starlings in one day. I believe this trap was on top of a 10-story building in Syracuse, N. Y.

February 12 Received EBBA News today and Robert Yunick's article on Silhouette Decoys (follow-up of Raymond Bubb's article in the July-Aug. 1963 EBBA News) made me realize how much is yet to be discovered about banding techniques and bird behavior in general. Don Varner's idea (Nov.-Dec. 1963 issue of EBBA News) about making Bluebird boxes smaller is another example. EBBA member Art Dunnell has now come up with an idea about banding at night at our Red Creek banding station. If his idea works, the present concept of night migration may be confirmed or revolutionized - or maybe just open up a lot of new questions. I'm really excited about the possibilities and this coming September the banders at Red Creek will be trying out his idea.

February 19 Five inches of snow on the ground this morning. Lots of birds at the feeders, and Walter Bigger's special trap is working fine. It is a 2-cell Potter type trap with openings in the top of each cell to remove birds. This is a wonderful trap for wet or snowy weather, as one does not need to get down on the ground to remove birds. This should help eliminate a complaint known as "banders knees."

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DECOYS FOR MIST NETTING

By J. A. Hardman

(Reprinted from The Ringers' Bulletin)

Catches of waders in mist nets at dusk, or all through the night on a moonlight night, can be considerably increased by setting out decoys in the water just on the upwind side of nets. The decoys serve both to bring down lower any birds flying over and to cause those birds intending to land to pitch in with the decoys and thus be intercepted by the net placed slightly downwind.

Silhouette-type decoys, made of wood or hardboard, can be used, but they are not so effective as proper stuffed decoys. The latter, however, are expensive to buy, or tedious to make and, in any case, do not stand up at all well to repeated handling in watery places. A simple and effective means of making a decoy from any dead bird which is picked up is to inject it with concentrated formaldehyde (formalin). This causes it to dry up or mummify if it is placed in a warm place for a few weeks. It does not smell and has an advantage over stuffed birds in that it is considerably more robust.

The dead bird should first be set up in a wire jig designed to keep the head, body, and legs in the required positions. The head, each muscle and the 'insides' should then all be injected with formaldehyde (about 10-20 ccs. will suffice for the whole bird). Dispensable plastic syringes can often be obtained from doctors or chemists. Wash off any solution which gets on your hands, as it can irritate. When the bird is dry and hard, remove the wire jig and tie thicker wire supports to the legs so that these project 3-6 ins. below the feet. These will serve to hold the decoy steady when set.

Similar decoys can also be used to induce birds into the catching area of clap nets.