

Nov.-Dec.

# A Bird Bander's Diary

by  
Ralph K. Bell



Oct. 18 .... The first Black-capped Chickadee of the fall season was heard today. We live in the Carolinian Life Zone and the Carolina Chickadee is the only chickadee that nests here. The only sure way to tell the 2 species apart (that I know of) is by the different fee-bee calls and by tail measurements (where the bander has a distinct advantage).

Oct. 19 .... Banded 18 Black-capped Chickadees today - all before 11 a.m. as I had to furl the nets and deliver eggs to some of the local stores. All were caught in the 2 nets in front of a clump of pines that I call the center field (about 100 yards west of our house). All chickadees were flying west or southwestward. Chickadees are apparently weak flyers and day migrants entirely. They generally fly in groups of 4 to 10 and hedge-hop from one group of trees to another. Many chickadees are apparently funneled through our yard since there are no close trees to the north or south.

The pictures show the path taken by the migrants as they fly through our yard into the yard pines on the left of our house. Soon they would leave these pines and stop at the small clump of pines (in center field) before continuing to the woods (on the far left).

When I first started netting in 1956, all nets were placed on the east side of the yard pines. But as the yard pines grew taller, many birds flew over the nets and my main netting operations were gradually shifted to the smaller pines to the west. Of the 18 chickadees banded today, eleven were checked for fat. Two were rated 0, seven were rated as 1, and two were given a rating of 2.

Nov. 12 .... This proved to be the last day for the fall chickadee migration (it lasted 26 days). A total of 154 were banded during this period. I have always considered a chickadee with a tail length of 59 mm or over to be a Black-cap and anything 57 mm or under to be a Carolina. Stephen W. Simon had a very good article on chickadee measurements in the Jan.-Feb. 1960 issue of EBBA News. Eight of the 154 banded this fall had a tail length of 58 mm, and since they were traveling with known Black-caps, I felt they were Black-caps also. Three had a maximum tail length of 66 mm. The average tail length for the 150 that were measured was 61.347 mm. Practically all the chickadees

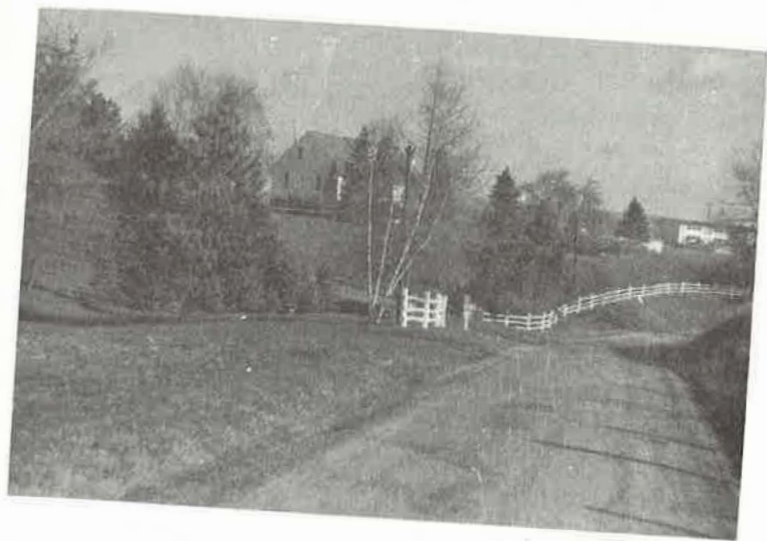


Fig. 1. Our home. The pond pines are on the left where our main netting used to be done.



Fig. 2. The same picture as above only from greater distance.



migration was between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. No movement of Carolina Chickadees out of the area was detected as only one was captured during this period (tail length 55 mm). The best day was November 3 when 26 Black-caps were banded, and at least that many more were observed flying over the nets. There was only one retrap during the whole period.

Many of the chickadees were aged by skull ossification. The article by Rebecca Cregar in the 1965 WORKSHOP MANUAL moved me enough to give the idea a try. Her advice to not "give up the ship" is very good. This is one of the most exciting developments to come along for banders since the introduction of the net. A whole new world of information is now open to all banders. One can check to see if mostly adults (or immatures) of a certain species are traveling through his area in the fall; whether adults migrate first (or last) or have no fixed pattern. By using the skull as a check, various plumage characteristics or other features can be checked to see if practically all birds can be aged swiftly without checking the skull. Chan Robbins has done wonders for us with his "Guide to Aging an Sexing Wood Warblers in the Fall," but information on many species has hardly been touched. As an example, while checking chickadees, I now believe that most immatures can be told until November first (at least) by the small black V in the roof of the mouth. The apex of the V meets the tip of the bill. I am just assuming this so please don't take this as the gospel truth. However, as I finish this writing (Jan. 10), I cannot find any black lines in the roof of mouth of captured chickadees. I will be checking chickadees again next summer and fall.

Perhaps it is a good practice not to check most birds for ossification late in the evening or on a wet or cold day. The shock of a wet head may be too much for some species at such times. Good light is essential (at least at first) until one gets to know just what to look for. Division of ossified and unossified skull may show a fairly straight or jagged line; or there may be large or small areas; round or irregular areas that often show red or very dark on immature birds. Dead birds found along the roads in the fall are a very good source of material to use in learning what to look for. I gained valuable experience by checking the skulls of English Sparrows caught in my traps. Personally, I prefer a loupe that fits over an old pair of glasses (my loupe is 7 power, but 10 might be better). By using a loupe instead of a hand lens, both hands are free to hold the skin tight on the skull and move it around at the same time. EBBA member James Baird issued a mimeographed sheet in the fall of 1963 on "Aging Birds by Skull Ossification" that should be a must in the files of every bander.

Dec. 26 .... This was the day selected for our Christmas count. A beautiful sunny day but cold compared to the many mild days this fall. We had a very unusual bird on our list of 41 species - a Barn Swallow. It is not even listed on the remittance sheet to be sent to Christmas Count headquarters. I thought about omitting it from the list (because it is only natural for anyone that studies birds seriously to question



Fig. 3. Pines in left center field where I now do most of my netting.



4. The same picture as above only from a different angle.

(Birds fly from right to left -- west)



its authenticity), but since it was really here and flying around a farm yard, it was included. It was observed by 3 persons besides myself - John Morgan, who banded for a month at our OR Station on top of the Allegheny Mountains in West Virginia this fall; Wesley Knisley (who makes the Bluebird boxes for our Bluebird project); and Arthur Biddle (owner of the large dairy farm where the Barn Swallow was discovered). John, Wesley and I were checking the large flock of over 1000 Cowbirds (for Redwings and Rustys) on the Biddle farm when we noticed a bird flying toward us with the rhythmic beat of a Barn Swallow, and I could hardly believe my eyes to see the distinctive forked tail as it flew over our heads about 10 feet away. It seemed very alert as it flew about catching insects (probably cattle flies) disturbed by the huge flock of Cowbirds among the dairy cattle. We watched it for perhaps 10 minutes as it would take short rests on the wire fence near us, circle over the cows, then up to the pond and back.

I realize the Barn Swallow is not supposed to even winter in the United States (although 4 counts in Florida recorded 8 on the 1964 count), but one can hardly mistake a bird that nests on his farm (ave. about 15 pairs) every summer for 20 years (and banded over 6500 of them). Without the mild weather this fall it would have been impossible for the Barn Swallow to have survived. A week of cold rainy weather in the spring will cause most of our Barn Swallows (and Martins too) to die from lack of food, but this has been a very mild fall, with no prolonged cold spells and very little rain. Many days in December found the temperature in the 50's or even higher. I checked the farm for the Barn Swallow on Dec. 31 but could not find it and only one Cowbird. The farm owner reported the Cowbirds soon left his farm. It is possible the Barn Swallow (considering its flocking tendencies in the fall) could have been staying with the Cowbirds and even roosting with them each night.

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#### TWO SIMPLE AIDS IN REMOVAL OF LARGE BIRDS FROM NETS

By T. A. Beckett, III

It is strange indeed how simple some of the common aids in our banding work can be, once they are thought of. This is also true in most of our everyday life.

After several years of rather painful removal of Terns from nets, more recently Gulls from cannon nets, the writer used his head instead of feeding patches of skin and flesh to his netted feather friends. It is rather odd how a Gull will peck at a wound on the bander's hands, each time enlarging and making more painful that certain spot or spots. Sim