

DECOYS, NET SETS AND BAITS

By Robert P. Yunick

The attracting and capturing of birds for banding purposes, like so many other aspects of banding, involve such diverse and varied situations that one bander's specific technique is likely to fail in the hands of another bander. Each bander has to modify techniques to specifically satisfy his own circumstances. Therefore, the following comments are meant to suggest possibilities and not represent hard and fast rules for attracting birds. It can be said, however, that common sense and a little Yankee know-how are always in order. Hopefully, in the Workshop Session we can build from these experiences with other people's experiences and bring forth a number of useful ideas.

For purposes of simplicity let us limit the topic of attraction to 1) decoys, 2) net sets and 3) baits. There are other interesting methods involving sound recordings, calls and the like, but these are out of reach of many banders.

Decoys (live)

Birds attract birds. Therefore, decoys, live or artificial, are of value when properly used to bring birds to trap or net. Many people are using live decoys, sometimes unknowingly or indirectly, so let us consider them first. An experience in my own yard with evening grosbeaks has shown the value of live decoys. My banding set up like most people's involves certain difficulties--one of mine is the grey squirrel. The backyard is small (60 X 75') and in close proximity to other people's yards and houses, thereby not allowing control measures to deal with the squirrels. I am forced to feed and trap atop elevated platforms mounted on pipes. After years of trial and error I have found that aluminum flashing tacked to the sides of these platforms makes them 100 percent free of squirrels and the birds can find food undisturbed. These platforms vary in size from 20 X 30 inches to 30 X 40 inches. Since the number of platforms is limited, the amount of trapping area is limited. My first and natural tendency was to cover all the available platform surface with traps. During the winter of 1963-1964, I sat and watched many a grosbeak on many a weekend sit in the trees in the yard and continue to sit and later fly off rather than come to the traps.

Finally, during the winter of 1964-1965 when purple finches came in good number, it became apparent that having some small amount of food available somewhere in the yard other than at the traps worked wonders. This year this technique has worked admirably on grosbeaks. Typically, this is how it works. The first birds to arrive will survey the scene. They show some trap shyness. The seed at a feeder bearing no trap offers the path of least resistance, and the birds readily come to it. However, this feeder has only a limited food supply. At this feeder, the birds'

feeding calls and occasional vocal skirmishes attract other birds. Soon the feeder is crowded with 12-14 birds. A reshuffling begins and the birds that get crowded out at the feeder show very little trap shyness and readily leave the feeder to go to the platforms with traps. It seems that leaving the other birds in the area makes many birds relax their guard. Since these platforms are more spacious, the platforms soon have many birds and the traps take their share—all because a few birds were allowed to feed, and these birds in turn decoyed other birds. One sees the same principle at work when new birds arrive—the traps with birds attract more birds than those with no captives. This technique works well on winter finches, icterids and to some extent on some of the sparrows—generally best on those species which are gregarious. It works equally well on the ground as on these platforms. Therefore, any effort one can make to get some birds in a trapping or netting area will help to bring other birds to the area and improve the take. There are some exceptions. Blue Jays and Grackles frighten a number of other birds simply by appearing on the scene.

Decoys (artificial)

Artificial decoys can be made to work well to 1) bring birds to artificial feeding areas (feeders) and 2) congregate birds at netting areas where one has no control over the food supply (mud-flats). Starlings and redwings come very readily to decoys set in areas strewn with grain, such as one's yard. As such, the decoys are effective in bringing birds into netting range.

Some limited experience with silhouette decoys set on or in traps for evening grosbeaks has shown what I believe can be accepted as two general rules for most species. One, in close places, the presence of a decoy in or on a trap makes birds uneasy and wary. Second, the closer a decoy is to the capturing device, the more authentic the decoy must be. It seems that silhouettes are inadequate for grosbeaks, however, since the live-decoy technique brought results, little has been done since with grosbeak silhouettes.

Often the most effective way to use an artificial decoy, regardless of style or type, is to place it in the general area, but not right at the trap, to simply bring birds into the area and let the lure of food take over from there. If one insists on using decoys in or near small traps (any trap that can be easily carried by one person), one will have to exercise great care in carving and painting authentic looking decoys. The ultimate is a stuffed or preserved bird. Formaldehyde injected into a freshly dead bird does an excellent job of preserving provided the specimen is kept dry and handled with care. Unfortunately, the possession and/or use of stuffed or preserved specimens can be complicated by state and federal laws and therefore difficult.

Decoy Construction

The materials from which decoys are made are many. One could use pine, balsa, paper maché, plaster, wax, styrofoam, polyurethane foam, modeling clay, cork and you name it. It all depends on what is available, how much it costs and how much work a person wants to do. I still like silhouettes for shorebirds, because they are easily made and compact. Twenty decoys can be carried easily in one hand. The more I use them and learn how to better use them, the more convinced I am that shorebirds will decoy to crude imitations, and therefore, one need not take great pains painting authentic plumages.

Net Sets

Much importance hinges on how nets are set and the relation of decoys to nets. The "cup-shaped" or "U" net set, described a year ago is still the best that I know of for shore birds. Decoys should be placed in the bend of the "U" in order to bring birds into the "U" so that they can be walked to the net and flushed into it. In this same regard, a "U" set in a baited area is a very productive arrangement. Placing bait near the nets on the inside of the "U" will attract birds. Those flying into the area may be netted, or subsequently a person approaching the opening of the "U" can flush those present into the net. Parallel net sets have been described by Beckett, and provided one can keep the birds from flushing parallel to the nets, this should be a very effective set for a baited area. For a general treatment on the setting of nets, one is referred to a paper by Low.³ It stands to reason that inconspicuously placed nets will generally take more birds. For this reason, some people may choose to use nets colored other than black.

Unfortunately, weather conditions are not always opportune for good banding, and one has to compensate accordingly. Fog, high humidity and light rain cause nets to stretch and sag. There are ways too numerous to mention here, but which hopefully will be mentioned in the session to compensate for sag and subsequent tautness or drying. In my own case where I use one-half-inch thin wall electrical conduit, the net is held by a rubber band to the pole. It is free to slide up and down the pole and cannot be securely fastened to take up slack. However, by setting nets in a zig-zag pattern vs. straight line, the slack can be taken up or let out by moving a pole a few inches one way or the other to accentuate or lessen the zig-zag.

By all means people should take advantage of elevated nets. Electrical conduit in five-foot lengths connected by dowels allows one to set nets as high as 12-13 feet. It is a question of adopting the net sets to the situation.

In thick cover where one does not have long straight net lanes, or where one wants to net around an obstacle without having to resort to

several short nets, one can use any smooth pole and angle a net round such a pole to by-pass obstacles.

Lastly, if nets are inadequate in satisfying some specific need, do not be afraid to take a pair of scissors to a net and tailor it to the situation. Trammel lines can be shortened, shelves removed, etc.

Tethering

Frequently wind is a problem. Some areas of the country have almost perpetual wind and at such places untethered nets can be worthless. Even taking advantage of available cover is not enough to counter a stiff wind. Tethering involves securing the slack netting on the trammel lines to prevent the wind from gathering the netting at one end thereby making the bulk of the net tight and ineffective. Tethering is accomplished in several ways, and two are worth mentioning. They are glueing with Duco cement and tying with nylon fishing line. Both are best done on a quiet day when one can set a net, adjust the slack and then work on the net. If a quiet day is not available and one must work in the wind, the slack should be adjusted and held in place by pinch clothespins, and then the net can be tethered. Tethering with Duco cement involves glueing a mesh of netting to a trammel line at various points. My own 12-m. nets are fastened at 10, 20 and 30 feet on the top, middle and bottom trammels and 15 and 25 feet on the remaining two trammels. After a year of hard use or two years of moderate use, reglueing is necessary. The fish-line technique involves fastening a line at one end of the trammel and tying knots at regular intervals along the trammel, so that the fish line secures a mesh to the trammel at the point of the knot. A variation of this is to tie the first knot at the middle of the net and work toward both ends with the resulting shorter pieces of line. Some people tie only one trammel, some tie two or more. Some tie every six inches, one foot, three feet or whatever strikes their fancy. Tethering has the slight disadvantage of taking some of the slack out of a net, but this disadvantage is far outweighed by the effectiveness of a tethered net in the wind. If net makers would put more vertical and horizontal slack in mist nets, a tethered net could be as effective as an untethered net on a quiet day. One other improvement would be to supply the nets of smaller mesh size with more supple netting. Some of these nets leave netting that feels hard and springy, and this does not work as well on light-weight birds. A soft, supple netting engulfs warblers and creepers very effectively. Sometimes this stiffness in nets appears due to a sizing on the nylon and can be partly removed by soaking and washing in warm water with a mild detergent like Ivory. Do not use a general purpose detergent containing alkaline agents. Alkali, like acid, attack nylon. I find it a good practice to give nets a warm-water wash in the late fall to remove bird droppings.

Baits

Bait selection is flavored strongly by personal preference, availability and past experience among other things. It is too magnanimous a subject to treat in detail. Besides there are many guides available which describe what to feed and how, and what to plant to attract birds. One can refer to a library, book dealer or National Audubon Society for texts of this type.

In my own case, I use medium grey sunflower seeds, suet and fine-cracked corn. Depending on where one goes, "fine-cracked" corn means many things. To some dealers it is practically dust. I prefer the dustless variety with corn bits about one-sixteenth inch in size. I do not recommend chick scratch which usually contains some wheat. In my experience birds do not like wheat. Occasionally I use millet, and the birds go for it. Bread, table scraps, egg shell and peanut butter are effective attractors also. If one's feeder is the only one for miles around, the birds will eat most anything offered. However, the way feeders have popped up in this area lately, the business of feeding birds has become a competitive sport. The birds skip about from feeder to feeder where they find the best offering. One little trick that I have found effective to get my share of birds is to use cracked sunflower seed. I put the whole seed through the coarsest cutter of a meat grinder. I people crush the seed by hammering it in a bag on a hard surface. Some Goldfinches, siskins, redpolls and other wee folk go wild over this cracked seed. Once again as long as some birds come, others join the feast.

Water is a great attractant and should be used by more banders. For those who have naturally occurring water on their property, there are any number of ways to use nets near water to get birds. Net sets along pond shores, across shallow ponds, across streams, etc., are useful. One should remember that stream openings are natural rights of way in areas of thick cover, and birds use these openings. The effectiveness of drip traps is well known. One can get results with nets near drips or bird baths. Cold weather need not discourage the use of water. Poultry water heaters are available inexpensively and can provide unfrozen water through the winter.

Lastly, it pays one to watch the actions of birds near one's traps and nets and look for clues that might make one's capturing more effective. Be willing to experiment with new sets and changes of routine. Rearranging one's netting pattern often pays handsomely.

