



# A Bird Bander's Diary

by  
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Sept. 18, 1966 .... Clear and calm here at our OR station on top of the Allegheny Mountains at Red Creek Campground in W. Va. While checking the temp. (36 degrees) at 6 a.m., I noted Swainson's Thrush calls overhead (when they apparently started to come down after a night's flight). The calls reached a crescendo at about 6:05 (Eastern Daylight Savings Time). It was impossible to estimate their number as every second was filled with many calls. George Hall and Cora Williams had experienced a similar heavy flight on 11 Sept. Such an event inspires excitement and wonder. Only we banders had the privilege of witnessing the phenomenon as the rest of the campers were still sleeping. It was the "hawk-watchers" weekend and the campground was filled with trailers, stationwagons and tents. To me, the early morning has always been the most inspiring part of the day, but most humans seem to prefer to sleep as late as possible. The Swainson's Thrush calls started to taper off after about 12 minutes .... at a time we call "break of day" (when just light enough to read). It was now 6:17 and a few calls of migrating Veeries were noted. As the light increased, the following calls were heard from the surrounding vegetation .... the first Robin at 6:20, a Whip-poor-will at 6:25, a Towhee and Catbird at 6:26 and a Wood Thrush at 6:29.

The area had been in the clouds (with heavy rain) on 13 and 14 Sept. Clearing began on the afternoon of the 15th. The weather reports indicated a cold front had gone through, but this one was different .... there were no strong winds from the northwest. In fact, it was almost calm. We know the thrushes had gone through, and there was no reason to believe the warblers had not gone by in vast numbers also. Yesterday was clear and sunny, and our catch was negligible - 52 birds of 16 species in 146 net hours. Today our catch was only 91 birds of 23 species in 139 net hours. This turn of events stimulates thought. I have always felt that the mass migrations on a hard NW wind were course corrections. After all, our station is less than 250 air miles from the Atlantic coast, and it is only natural to presume that in the remote past, only the birds (that nested in the NE section of the continent) that migrated in a SW direction, lived to reproduce their kind. Would not this directional ability be reproduced in their offspring the same as the urge to migrate? Would not this explain the frantic urge of those tiny bodies to get up over that obstacle (the rim) and get going in the proper SW direction?

Sept. 24 .... Clear with temp. of 34 degrees at 6 a.m. Wind from the WNW at 25-30 miles per hour. All the proper ingredients present for a great migration, and we were not disappointed. Not a Swainson's Thrush

call was heard overhead, but the nets were loaded at daybreak. I counted 12 in a 5-foot space in one net. Were the thrushes trying to make a course correction because of being blown eastward during the night?

EBBA member Clark Miller of Inwood, W. Va., arrived last evening and had picked an excellent time for his first visit. We soon became organized. Bander Tom Olsen, his wife Virginia, and daughters Cheryl and Karen elected to oversee the removal of birds from the nets while Cora Williams, Clark Miller and I banded in the cave (George Hall had not yet arrived). Since the cave is down over the lip of the rim, it is well protected from the wind and was nice and warm in the bright morning sun. The Olsens' were quite busy bringing gathering cages full of birds and paper bags with a Rose-breasted Grosbeak in each (they should never be put in with another bird). A Rose-breasted Grosbeak migration is a fascinating sight. Each year I hope we will catch one of Betty Downs (S. Londonderry, Vermont) banded birds, but as yet, no luck. A continual stream of birds passed us on their way up to the rim. Some occasionally fly into the cave. One could sense the excitement of the visitors and workers alike. I asked Clark Miller how it felt to be there on a "big day," and after a typical Clark Miller pause of thought and study, he answered, "NICE!"

Many birds were aged by checking the skull for ossification. It is really not difficult with many birds when one gets on to it. Blackpolls and Swainson's Thrushes are especially easy. In fact, some of the Blackpolls are so easy no magnifying lens is even needed. Many characteristics were noted that suggest age (without ossifying), but I will not mention them here (without further study) as I find in checking chickadees this fall that the black lines in roof of mouth are not an indicator of age (as I suggested in EBBA NEWS Vol. 29, No. 1, page 34). Please excuse the error.

Oct. 20 .... Left home for Red Creek at 3:40 a.m. As I neared the top of the mountain, I found area completely enveloped in clouds and there was an inch of snow on the ground. At the campground, some Grouse hunters from near Columbus, Ohio, were taking down their tent and packing to leave. When they awoke and saw that snow, that was the convincer. I told them the weather reports indicated it was to clear, soon, but they had been in the clouds for 4 days and the look on their faces told me they had "had it."

As I started putting up the nets in the snow and a 15 mile per hour west wind, I thought of a comment my wife has made more than once "that banders are crazy." But to a bander the future always holds promise, and by 10 o'clock the clouds started to break up and the sun came out. With it the Robins started coming up the ravine in flock after flock until about 2 p.m. A group of Bluebirds came up over at 11:15 a.m., and several more later. The Robins started again at about 5:00 p.m., and at 6:50 a flock of about 20 Crows came down the migration path. This is the first time I have ever noted migrating Crows here (but I am seldom here in Oct.). Grackles were going over at dusk.

The station was in operation for 24 days in Sept. (due to rain) and 8 in October (the nets were closed for 4 days in Sept. due to rain). A

total of 2989 birds of 75 species were banded in 2772 net hours. Here is a summary of our best days at Red Creek this fall.

<u>Date</u>	<u>No. banded</u>	<u>Species</u>	<u>Net hours</u>	<u>Predominant species</u>
Sept. 6, 1966	164	22	56	Tenn. War. 37 Blackburnian 24
Sept. 23	268	26	107	Swainson's Th. 80 R.-br. Grosbeak 37
Sept. 24	385	31	102	Swainson's Th. 118
Sept. 30	345	25	75	Blackpoll 111
Oct. 2	195	26	41	Blackpoll 52
Oct. 8	174	34	95	Bl.-th. Green W. 37
Oct. 22	119	20	101	Robin 40

Banders present this fall at one time or another included Dr. George Hall, Connie Katholi, Jack Lanehan, Clark Miller, John Morgan, Tom Olsen, Anne Shreve, Betty Vossler, and Cora Williams. A lot of credit for this year's success should go to Cora Williams and her husband Bill. They lived up there in their trailer for 28 days in September. Cora did so well it is hoped she will take charge of a lot of the banding next year and give George Hall and me a chance to check on migration (observe) both north and south of our banding station during those periods of heavy flights.



Hawk watchers at Bear Rocks, 3 miles north of banding station.



Cora Williams at cave.