



*Nov. ~ Dec.*

## *A Bird Bander's Diary*

*By Ralph K. Bell*



Dec. 31, 1967 ... This was the day selected for our annual Christmas count. It was 17 degrees temperature early in the morning and a light snow was falling. Wintertime has always been a fascinating time for me. When I was a youngster here on the farm, each season was looked forward to with varying degrees of anticipation and the winter season seemed to be in a class by itself. Chores were less then and there was time for fun and games. Farm families were much more self-sufficient in this area then than they are now. If the snows were too deep, or the roads too muddy to get to town this month, next month would do. Snows seemed so much deeper then, and they were to a 6-year-old. A 12" snowfall made walking almost impossible. My wife likes to tell friends how I spent two years in the first grade at school. But the real reason for this was that my mother would not let me go to school much in the wintertime. Our one-room country school was  $1\frac{1}{2}$  mile away and the trip through the woods and fields had plenty of hazards. A neighbor girl (who would do anything on a dare) went through a six-foot snowdrift once and help had to be summoned to get her out.

At school we built forts out of snow and had many snowball battles. "Fox and Hounds" was a popular game. Many took their sleds to school to be in on the sledding races. On weekends, we played hockey down on the creek. Our hockey sticks were made by hand and our puck was a tin can, but we had fun and luckily no one drowned.

But winter also brought new strange birds. My father would haul hay from stacks in the fields to the barn for the livestock. When the hay was unloaded alongside the barn there was always lots of weedseeds. These

attracted flocks of Juncos, Tree Sparrows and Horned Larks. My father was interested in ornithology at one time and had Reed's BIRD GUIDE. I would take this little book to the barn and study the birds as I looked through the cracks in the barn door. How I wished I could catch one and really study it in the hand. I didn't know it then, but this dream was to be realized in the future when I received my bird-banding license and learned how to make traps.

My brother and I subscribed to Bird-Lore and I would read and re-read the results of the various Christmas Bird Counts in various parts of the U.S., but no serious attempt at making a census here was tried until 1953. I walked over the farm here and found 16 species, but since regulations were not adhered to it was not sent in to Audubon Field Notes. Soon, interested birders helped and as we learned where to look for various birds, our species total climbed and reached a peak of 49 in the year 1959. It is hard to have a big list here since there is not a good area for ducks and usually one species here is our limit. This was the case this year. Since most streams and ponds were frozen over, we found 28 Mallards in the usual place - the open pond at Bailey's Crossroads where warm water is continually pumped from a deep coal mining operation.

The day started at 6 am. when Wesley Knisley and I drove up McMinn's Hollow to listen for some owls. A light snow was falling and not an owl could be heard. I whistled an imitation of the Screech Owl call and waited a few minutes. Then a far-off individual answered back and soon another one opened up. The next stop produced two more Screech Owls and then the tingling "hoot" of a Great Horned Owl came from across the valley. A few more stops and we had nine Screech Owls and two "hooters". As daylight was approaching, we headed for Khedive and the flat country to check for Meadowlarks and Killdeer. EBBA member Lee Lowden drove up as we stopped. Lee is naturalist for the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy at Ohiopyle in nearby Fayette County.

Two Red-bellied Woodpeckers and a Carolina Wren were calling on a distant hillside, but no Meadowlarks were found until we rechecked the area in the afternoon. EBBA member John Morgan from Charleroi, Pa., joined us and we started to cover the good spots systematically. We looked for the Kingfisher at his table on the rock below the old iron bridge at Pollack's Mill and the telephone cable across 10-Mile Creek at Chartier's Bridge. No luck at either place. We checked the open spring near 5-Points for a Wilson's Snipe without success. Often a snipe (and occasionally a Killdeer) have been found here. The place was checked again on January 8 and a Snipe was there - feeding in the boggy area less than ten feet from the edge of the paved road. Birding by car has its advantages at times. How often would one be able to walk within a few feet of a feeding Snipe without scaring it away?

The Goslin Dairy Farm is always one of our best stops. Grainfeeding

birds are always found there. It is the only place I have ever found the Rusty Blackbird on a Christmas Count (1959). This year we found 67 Horned Larks, 18 Mourning Doves, a Sparrow Hawk and then Lee spotted our only Cowbird (a female) among the large flock of House Sparrows. As we were about ready to leave, the Crows started fussing in the swampy area about a half-mile away. Soon we noted a large hawk fly up and land in the top of a tree. Lee and John thought they detected some white in the tail. Without a spotting scope, the distance was too great to be sure of the species. We waited perhaps ten minutes for him to fly, and as he took off we immediately saw it was a Rough-legged Hawk - a record for our area. At least, none has ever been officially recorded. We watched him fly across in front of us for perhaps a half-mile. The dark tail band and the white in the tail and under the wings was very distinctive. It was a thrilling sight. John Morgan and I had both seen one before but this was a "first" for Lee Lowden.

We couldn't find any Robins or Cedar Waxwings this year, but we ended up with 40 species - just about average - and the Roughleg made it a memorable day.

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TO THE EDITORS OF EBBA NEWS:

I just wanted to prove to you that your publication has a very wide appeal. This is Emily Freer at 8 months, and she reads you just as well right side up as upside down. I, too, like EBBA News.

Valerie M. Freer, Ellenville, N.Y.

EBBA NEWS Dr. Kenneth W. Prescott, Director, New Jersey State Museum,  
BACK ISSUES Cultural Center, Trenton, N.J. 08625, is interested in obtaining a complete series of EBBA News from 1950 or 1951 to the present; and he would be interested in older issues too. Anyone interested in selling a complete series, or possibly a substantial part, should contact Dr. Prescott at the address given.