

THE PRIZE CATCH - 1968
By Mrs. Murray Olyphant, Jr.

As each year of banding comes and goes, a certain bird or group of birds usually stands out as the one that was the most thrilling to handle or the most exciting to catch for banding purposes. There have been many that have provided me with great joy and excitement, but a certain very round little individual with a most unusual bill, caught in July of 1968, leads the pack for this year and stands out in front of all the rest.

Since 1962, it has always been one of my banding highlights to visit our friends, Joseph and Persis Fitzpatrick, who live about 12 miles northwest of my home banding station. The purpose of these particular visits each June and early July is to attempt to band their colony of Purple Martins. Except for 1963, I have made two visits each summer - one to catch the adults, and the other to catch the young of the year, after they have left the nest.

Johnny Fitzpatrick, one of Joe's and Persis' four sons, is an outstanding young naturalist at the age of just 17. He keeps careful watch on the Martin house that he himself built from scratch, and calls me when he thinks the time has arrived to band. We do not want to run the risk of a Martin deserting the nest, so we wait until we think the adult birds are fully established on the eggs before we attempt to band them. This is usually during the first week of June.

The second visit is times to catch the young after they have flown from the nest, but are still coming into the house, or are frequenting the vicinity, at night. This is usually during the latter part of the first or second week of July.

Those of you who have banded Purple Martins may perhaps agree that the best time of day to try to catch them is from the early evening into the dusk just as the sun is setting. Perhaps this is due in part to the mosquitoes' being at their best. I know I must always carry bug repellent or I would go out of my head. Minnesota mosquitoes are giant sized.

The way that we set the nets is a little different for Martin banding than for banding of other passerines. Because of the height of the Martin house from the ground (roughly ten feet), we use three lengths of half-inch conduit poles (15 feet total), and set the nets on the upper two so that the top of the nets is roughly 14 feet high and the bottom is seven feet up. I use two 12-meter $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch mesh nets set in a "V"; one east of the house running north and south, and one north of it, running east and west from the northern point of the north-to-south net. The east-to-west net is placed along an area bordered by a thick stand of hazelbrush and honeysuckle. The other net borders an open meadow to the east and is the net that catches the most Purple Martins when they swoop in from their

evening sorties over the fields and nearby ponds, or from their perch on nearby electrical lines. I have to add here one more bit of description to give the complete picture: the Martin house is placed on top of a hill. To the west, the Fitzpatricks' property steadily descends for about 600 feet to a marshy pond named "Mallard".

On July 16, 1968, we had had a good catch of Purple Martins. Johnny had invited a friend of his over to observe the procedures of banding. This young man was just getting interested in birds...but I wondered after his meeting this bird bander, and her resulting behavior over her prize, whether he thought better or worse of the subject the next day.



Drawing by Murray Olyphant

Because of the extra long length of poles, it is rather awkward to take them and the nets down by oneself. In this task Johnny has always been a very helpful assistant. He had just uncoupled the south pole of the north-south net, as I also had done at the north end of the same net in the semi-darkness of 9 o'clock, when I spotted to the west of the Martin house what I thought was a big bat flying low over the lawn. I shouted, "Oh! John, we're just in time, as the bats are beginning to fly".

By this time the middle of the net was sagging on the ground, and Johnny had started to walk towards me gathering the net as he proceeded in my direction. What happened next I was completely unprepared for. I could hardly believe what I heard - "Mrs. Olyphant! That was no bat, you just caught a Woodcock!"

I dropped my end of the net, flew to the middle, and managed somehow to get the bird out, really not seeing what I was doing, just feeling my way with nylon mesh and bird. I managed to hold on to the slippery, strong fellow, get him into my nylon mesh holding bag, somehow got the nets put away, and then ran with Johnny and his friend, into the house to see this round ball of "dead-leaf patterned" fluff with the long, long bill. What was going through Johnny's friend's head or Johnny's head for that matter, about their impressions of a bird bander, must have been something unfit to print, as I do not remember a thing that I said. I knew I felt terribly excited about this shy bird, that neither my words nor my actions could have made much sense. I kept asking for the best light in the house so that we could get the best impression of the Woodcock's plumage. And one of the boys brought me a millimeter ruler because my caliper was too small. I felt like the proverbial chicken with its head cut off.

Size 3 band #873-68016 was carefully placed on the bird's left tarsus. At this point I kept thinking that I did not want to upset the bird any more than was necessary, and that I must let it go as quickly as possible. I raced through Roberts' description of the American Woodcock, and decided from the description of the plumage and the condition of the feathers that it was a HY-U bird. With that I rushed blindly outdoors, bird in hand, to let the Woodcock go. Johnny followed with a flashlight and we set it down in some tall grass by an old sand box, halfway between the Fitzpatrick house and the Martin house.

Coming back to the house, I stopped dead in my tracks and chokingly whispered, "Oh, Johnny, I forgot to 'skull' the bird and I didn't even take its measurements...How unscientific can a bander become in her old age?"..."I wonder if the Woodcock is still by the sand box?"

This time like a cat stalking a mouse, I crept slowly up the hill, and in the ray of the flashlight, there was my bird still in the same spot of grass. Reaching slowly down with shaking hands, I carefully picked up the Woodcock. Trying to act calm about the whole situation, we proceeded back to the light in the living room, and there examined for ossification and took careful measurements of the bird. My original hunch about age was found to be correct, when examining the skull. The little fellow was an HY-U.

While adjusting the Woodcock in my hands for measuring, it flapped its wings and there was no question that they "whistled" when beating. Very interestingly shaped and unusual are those three outer primaries. I

have never seen such a beautiful color as that rich tawny rufous on the bird's breast and belly. And that crazy bill! The upper mandible does bend in the middle.

Now it was time for final release, and we went once more up the hill with the aid of Johnny's flashlight, this time to the meadow beyond the meadow beyond the Martin house (where the Woodcock had been headed in the first place), and quickly set the bird down.

An interesting conclusion to this madcap story developed the next afternoon. While talking to our friend Mr. Dave Vesall, Supervisor, Section of Game, Minnesota Dept. of Conservation, I told him of my merry escapade the previous evening. Dave became interested instantly and wanted to know as much as I could tell him about the location of my banding of the Woodcock. He told me that this year his department has started a detailed study of the American Woodcock in Minnesota. Apparently very little is known about the exact nesting locations and the areas that the species frequents during the spring, summer and fall. The possibility that the Woodcock nests so close to the Twin Cities could itself be of real value to the Section of Game. Johnny called me a week later and told me that a conservation officer had paid him an extended visit. They talked Woodcock!

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BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE: Aaron M. Bagg, Farm St., Dover, Mass. 02030
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION writes: "I would be very grateful for any fall-1968 banding data on Black-capped Chickadees, as well as any observations of migrating chickadees noted this fall. In at least one area of the Maine coast, September 1968 brought a very good flight of these chickadees, and I would be interested in learning how widespread the phenomenon may be this fall. In regard to chickadees seen migrating, I would appreciate such details as dates, numbers of birds involved, directions in which the chickadees were flying, and information on their behavior on encountering rivers, lakes, or the sea. Many thanks!"