

COPPERHEAD KILLS NETTED BIRDS

By John P. Hubbard

Late in the afternoon of July 29, 1969, I discovered an 18" Copperhead (Agkistrodon contortix) lying near one end of a streamside mist net at Rockbridge Alum Springs Biological Laboratory, west of Lexington, Va. In the lowest shelf of the net a few inches from the snake were two dead birds, a fledgling Carolina Wren (Thryothorus ludovicianus) and an adult Ovenbird (Seiurus aurocapillus). The latter was decapitated, and its detached, moistened head lay on the ground nearby. After dispatching the snake, I removed the two birds from the net and examined their remains. The skinned carcass of the wren showed two areas of intense subcutaneous clotting; one in the upper left breast and another in the lower right breast. The body of the Ovenbird showed a similar wound in the left scapular region, and the left eye was bloody and punctured. A presumed puncture hole showed clearly in the skin of the Ovenbird. The evidence suggested strongly that the Copperhead had struck and killed the two netted birds, probably about 15 minutes before I discovered the situation.

At the time of my arrival at the net the snake had apparently been in the process of swallowing the Ovenbird, head first. I had initially stopped on the other side of the stream, opposite the snake and the dead birds, and in the gloom of the thicket I was unable to see anything except a sagging in the net. I had lifted the bottom shelves of the net to free the unseen obstruction, and in the process the snake was lifted off the ground, only to fall back to it as the engulfed head of the Ovenbird tore loose from the bird's body. As I approached the still unclearly discerned snake, it coiled and vibrated its tail in the dry leaves. By that time it had dropped or ejected the head of the Ovenbird from its mouth.

That a Copperhead will kill and attempt to feed on birds is neither new nor surprising information. The enactment of the process in a mist net, however, can come as a shock to a bird bander. Coping with such predation is not easy, because foraging snakes can be quickly attracted to nets containing struggling birds. More frequent net checks or removal of the nets to other sites are aides to the solution of this problem, and if snakes are actually discovered near netting areas they can be removed or dispatched, the former being preferred. In areas where venomous snakes occur the problem becomes more acute, as not only is the safety of netted birds at stake but obviously that of the bander as well. In such areas the caution of always looking where one is going to put one's hands or to walk should be remembered and practiced.

Route 2, Goshen, Virginia 24439

