

Nov. ~ Dec.

A Bird Bander's Diary

By Ralph K. Bell



Oct. 31, 1969 ... The first fall migrating Evening Grosbeaks were heard going over at approximately 3:30 pm. It was a nice warm day and I was covering the big Purple Martin box with a clothlike plastic cover to protect it from the many winter storms that are certain to be coming our way. Even with our present knowledge about bird migrations, I'm sure most true birders get a thrill out of sighting or hearing the first migrants of most species of birds. It is no wonder that the early civilizations were awed by this phenomenon.

Little did I realize that these first migrating Evening Grosbeaks were a prelude of things to come - one that was to prove very interesting to birders and banders alike. Many so-called northern species were to come southward in large numbers, some of them to areas where they had never been recorded before. The reasons for these periodic invasions is not completely clear but it is likely caused either by overpopulation, a lack of food supplies or a combination of both. Reports are coming in that there was extreme cold weather with snow last June over much of northern Canada. One published report (in a Pittsburgh paper) during the hunting season stated that the reason for fewer Canada Geese this fall was due to this cold weather - even stating that there were below-zero temperatures and over a foot of snow in some sections. Even if this is an overstatement, a prolonged period of snow and subfreezing temperatures during the peak nesting season would greatly affect the liveability of young of many species. This would also affect the production of winter seeds and berries. As the winter progresses and more reports come in, one can better evaluate the reasons behind this interesting ornithological winter.

Dec. 27 ... This was the day EBBA member Lee Lowden had selected for his Christmas Count in the mountains of nearby Fayette County. Since John Morgan is here for the holidays from his new home in Old Town, Maine, he

had suggested we drive over in his new Jeep station wagon and this later proved to be a wise choice. Since we are all banders we have helped each other with our Christmas Counts the past few years. When John and I reached the well-kept Lowden place near the picturesque town and falls of Ohio, Pa., Lee was already out wading around in the deep snow checking on the birds near his home. Lee is an excellent birder and a very careful one. Since no other serious birder lived nearby, he learned the identity of each species all on his own - a slow process, but many famous birders started out this way.

Soon we were driving over the snow covered mountain roads checking the most likely places for various species. Since the snow was about knee deep and more was falling steadily, John and Lee walked at one place to check at garbage dumps for Ravens. They were there and the two Ravens were an important addition to the list. About noon we decided to look for Snow Buntings at a farm where Lee had found them earlier. A snow plow had gone through and we thought the Jeep could make it, but that was our mistake. The Jeep roared up the road through the blinding drifting snow. At about 100 yards from the top of the hill we hit an especially large snow drift and came to a sudden stop. The Jeep wouldn't move forward or backward as so much snow was packed underneath that the wheels were off the ground. We surveyed the situation and decided we were in quite a predicament. Lee took out his wind gauge and the wind velocity was 35 mph. The drifts were already up to the Jeep windows and were getting deeper. I hiked to the nearest farm house and asked to borrow a shovel. A girl answered my knock and said she would be glad to lend us a shovel - but could I wait until she had fixed the furnace as it was the only one she had.

After two hours of shoveling we managed to move the Jeep backwards about 100 yards. If we shoveled very much at one time, the drifting snow would fill back in where we had already shoveled. So we decided the best system was to shovel about 20 feet and then back the Jeep into the space. Finally, a big farm tractor (with chains) came to help us out. It also got stuck trying to reach us but eventually we all made it back to the main road. We must have been quite a sight as there were icicles, some over an inch long, hanging from our eyebrows, earlobes, etc. The heat from our faces melted the drifting snow and this would run down and form the icicles. Lee didn't have a cap and a quarter inch of ice covered his scalp and was matted all through his hair. The man on the tractor asked what we were doing on such a road. I don't think he believed our story and if he did, he has probably decided that birders are crazy people for sure. Sometime, I would like to pay him a visit (on a hot summer day) and try to convince him that "dedicated" would be a better word!

We then headed for Lee's place to get thawed out. We had hoped to find crossbills and possibly a Snowy Owl but the weather wasn't very cooperative. Maybe next year will be better.

Dec. 28 ... Our Clarksville Christmas Count was held today. Most streams and ponds were frozen over and the ground was covered with five inches of snow, but this turned out to be a calm, sunny day. The first species checked for was the Screech Owl. I drove over some local roads just before daylight and made four stops. By whistling an imitation of their calls, they often answer if in the area. In the four stops I had seven owls. Two even flew into a nearby tree and were silhouetted against the brightening morning sky. The Screech Owl is usually a very common bird in our area and at one time it was often missing from our list - especially if the weather was bad and none could be found perched in the entrance of a favored natural cavity of a large tree. They love to sit in the sun on cold winter days and seem to prefer an old knot hole or Pileated Woodpecker hole with a southern exposure. Seldom have I seen a Screech Owl perched in an opening that does not face toward the sun in the wintertime.

John Morgan, Lee Lowden and Wes Knisley arrived soon after daybreak all set for a big day. The farm was checked first and then John took his Jeep again and drove us around in the prescribed area. When the totals of five parties in the field were added together this proved to be quite a successful count. A total of 48 species was recorded - just one species short of the record set in 1959.

For total numbers, ten species exceeded any previous count. These were the Ring-necked Pheasant, Mourning Dove, Flicker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Horned Lark, Bluebird, Cardinal, American Goldfinch, Slate-colored Junco and Song Sparrow. Three new species were added to the list this year - Great Blue Heron, Common Redpoll and Snow Bunting. Lee Lowden spotted the 13 Snow Buntings with a large flock of Horned Larks on a large dairy farm. The Great Blue Heron was one of the most unexpected finds. When we stopped on a bridge over a small ice-covered stream, there, all hunched up on the ice was the heron. His dejected look seemed to say "where has all the water gone?"

One of the real nice things found was the big increase in wintering Bluebirds. We had a total of 69 individuals. The two other best Bluebird counts (since 1953) were 25 in 1955 and 28 in 1964. It looks as if our Bluebird box venture is really paying off. It will be interesting to check the Christmas Count issue of Audubon Field Notes to see if the Bluebird count is up in other areas also.

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