



March-April

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
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March 22, 1970 ... A new species of bird has been added to our local list - the Whistling Swan - a truly magnificent bird. There are plenty of records for this bird in the counties adjoining us on the north and east (one as far back as 1872) but we are just south of the normal migration route from their wintering grounds in the Chesapeake Bay area up through the Great Lakes to their breeding grounds north and west of Hudson Bay. To birders living near their wintering grounds or migration route, the sighting of this bird probably does not cause much excitement but to us here in the extreme southwestern corner of Pennsylvania, this bird is really news - even the newspapers took pictures.

A local birder, Kitty Crayne, was the first to call me about four very large white birds in a flat field about three miles from here and only about 80 yards from a much-traveled road. She had no idea what they were and when I suggested gulls, she said "oh no, they are big birds". Later our TV repairman called and said "we have four Whistling Swans down here, two old and two young". When asked how he knew they were Whistling Swans, he replied that he had checked two bird books and that they could not be Mute Swans because there was no knob on the bill.

Why they were in that cornfield is not clear unless there was some corn left that had not been eaten by the crows that constantly visited the field during the winter. But from what I have read about this species it would appear unusual for them to prefer to be on land during migration. They had evidently been forced down from their migration flight by the bad weather the night before, a mixed rain and snow storm. They stayed in that field until March 24 with only a short sojourn to a farm pond about one-half mile away when a newspaper photographer tried to get too close. They soon flew back to the same spot in the field and paid little attention to the many people who stopped their cars along the road to observe them. Late in the afternoon of March 24 the four swans left the field and went

down to the Monongahela River when they apparently left on their north-westward journey during the night of March 25.

The Whistling Swan is a good example of how man can help a species come back if he cares to. Before the year 1900 many swans were slaughtered by hunters during migration in northwestern Pennsylvania when they were forced down by severe storms and they were actually scarce at the turn of the century in that area. In later years a federal law gave them absolute protection and they have increased to such an extent that they are often seen in large numbers along their migration route. EBBA member Cora Williams wrote me that at least 500 were on a lake near Indiana, Pa., this spring on March 19.

April 27 ... I'm sure most birders are often told unusual stores about birds by people in their community. A most unusual one was related to me this afternoon by Mr. Debiase, a resident of a farm about four miles south of here near the village of Khedive. Since the Debiase farm (and adjoining farm) has been a sure place to find Upland Plovers each summer, I had stopped to ask if he had notice any of them this spring. He hadn't but went on to tell me quite a story. First, he pointed to his chimney which is the usual type for this area - a chimney with two flues, one of which is often not used any more since central heating has come into common usage.

Early one morning two weeks previously, Mr. Debiase heard a pecking on the metal disk that covers the unused flue in his basement. He presumed it was a Starling and decided to ignore it, and told his wife that now there would be one less Starling to bother the "good" birds. The pecking continued and toward evening Mr. Debiase decided that maybe it was too cruel to let the Starling starve to death, and he slowly removed the metal disk and looked in. At first all he could see was a fair-sized egg and the two legs of a dirty, soot-covered bird. He pulled it out and was surprised to find that it was a duck (which from his description was probably a Wood Duck as this species is rather common along the stream not far from his house). Mr. Debiase said he tried to clean the soot off the bird and then released it in the swampy field below his house. I asked him if he still had the egg (to help identify the bird) but he said "no, we ate it".

April 29 ... The last migrant Black-capped Chickadee was caught and banded today at 11:15 a.m. Since we live about 20 miles from the closest known breeding range of the Black-caps, the migration dates in the spring and fall are easy to determine. The Carolina Chickadee is our resident chickadee and it is easy for a bander to tell the difference by wing and tail measurements. Also, the average Black-cap had much more frosting on the wings than the Carolina. Often this characteristic (along with the longer tail) is easy to detect with a little practice, even when the bird is perched in a tree. In fact, EBBA member Connie Katholi wrote me this past January that she could tell a Black-cap from a Carolina better in a tree than in the hand because one gets better perspective at a distance.

Apparently the return (spring) migration was not heavy through this area as only nine were caught and banded. The spring migrants are most likely to be caught in a different net location than those in the fall. This is caused by migration flight characteristics of the chickadee. When they leave a tree or clump of trees, they usually leave from the top or upper section of the tree and their line of flight often dips slowly toward the ground and then raises again as they approach the next clump of trees. Because of this habit of chickadees, and some other species also, the nets in our yard are placed accordingly. In other words, between the two groups of evergreens, that I shall call the east and west clump of trees. The fall migrating birds usually fly over the top of the nets as they leave the tops of the east clump of trees but get caught as they start their rise to alight on the west trees. In the spring the reverse is true.

Since practically all the spring migrant chickadees go through this area in April, I have checked my banding records and drawn up the following table showing the banding dates (inclusive) and day of peak migration which usually occurs close to the middle of the month. The number of Black-capped Chickadees banded the preceding fall is in parentheses.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Banding Dates</u>	<u>No. Banded</u>	<u>Peak Day & No.</u>
1958	April 14-17	14 (44)	April 17 5
1960	" 2-20	35 (46)	" 14 8
1962	" 4-26	37 (77)	" 25 14
1963	" 6-16	3 (11)	No peak
1964	" 11-23	13 (76)	" 15 5
1966	" 19-29	20 (154)	" 21 5
1969	" 16	1 (32)	" 16 1
1970	" 9-29	9 (10)	" 13 4

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