



May-June
A Bird Bander's Diary
By Ralph K Bell

May 1, 1970 ... The June Bugs are here and "woe is me" as my father used to say when anything really provoked him. The dictionary defines "woe" as grief, sorrow, or misery. To a bander, who likes to have his nets open overnight, the June bug (also known as May beetles) can cause all three with a lot of frustration thrown in for good measure. I've often wondered if banders using nets in other areas were bothered by these creatures as much as we are here.

No doubt, the June bug is an important food item for some birds and animals. The adult June bug lays her white eggs in an earth-covered ball among roots on which the white grubs feed for two or three years. These pupate underground during the fall months and the adults appear the following spring. Skunks are especially fond of the fat grubs and make a cone shaped hole in the ground as they dig them out.

I usually associate the first spring migrant Catbirds with the first emerging June bugs. This year the first Catbird beat the June bug by two days. No doubt a few birds are netted as they are attracted to a struggling June bug. Some bugs are eaten and birds are not caught but by and large, a net full of bugs warns approaching birds of danger ahead. In general, birds will alter their course and avoid the nets altogether.

Anyone who has removed June bugs from a net knows that it can be a time consuming job. As a bug becomes entangled in a net, it immediately attempts to crawl about to pull itself free. After a whole night of clawing, a single bug can draw together an amazing amount of netting and

have it so tangled up, that in extreme cases, it may take several minutes to completely disentangle it. The past few years, I have kept the nets furled overnight during the peak June bug season. Naturally, many of the migrating birds which came in at the first light of dawn are now missed but it was either that, or quit catching birds during that period altogether. This decision was made several years ago, when I counted 142 bugs in one 9-meter net, one morning. It took me over an hour to clear that net and of course, all the other six nets took their share of bugs too. Some nets had to be furled - bugs and all, and cleared when time could be found to work on them. This seems cruel and as bugs dry out and die quickly in the hot sun, I do not like to do it. Even when removed from the net, the head is removed first. Who are we to say that a bug has no feelings?

May 14, 1970 ... After delivering eggs to some stores in Waynesburg, Pa., I returned home by way of the Loves Hill area to check some of the Bluebird boxes. This area is unique, not only because more Bluebirds can be found here than anywhere else, but also because there are very few House Wrens and House Sparrows (both prime enemies of Bluebirds in this area). The Loves Hill locality is also the best place to find the Summer Tanager and the now rare, Bewick's Wren and Red-headed Woodpecker. There was only enough time to check 9 bluebird boxes but every one contained young to be banded. Six young were banded in two boxes and I have noticed 6 eggs (or young) in more boxes than usual, this spring.

May 17, 1970 ... Since so many EBBA members are quite interested in the welfare of the Eastern Bluebird, perhaps this is the moment to make some comments. I do believe the combined mortality on their winter grounds last winter (and migration losses) was a little above average. We still have lots of Bluebirds, but a few key boxes (especially in marginal areas where this bird is never abundant) were not occupied. EBBA member Merit Skaggs of near Cleveland, Ohio, wrote that he did not have a single occupied box this spring in one of his box routes.

Here the bluebird situation looks very encouraging indeed. There were no nestling losses from bad weather this spring and the number of young in the boxes is improving. Today, I decided to spend the entire day checking boxes. After driving 101 miles and checking 103 boxes, a total of 140 young were banded from 31 of these boxes. Many others, contained eggs or young too small to band.

The Banding Laboratory has just sent me a Bluebird recovery report. A nestling, banded near Loves Hill area on June 9, 1968 was shot near Douglas, Georgia on February 21, 1970. This recovery is near the south-central part of the state and about 50 miles north of Florida. It is a little farther south than I had expected our Bluebirds to winter.

June 1, 1970 ... As I stepped out of the house at 10.50 A.M., I heard the unmistakable 'tic-tic-tic' call of the Red Crossbill. I could hardly believe my ears. All past experiences with this bird raced through my mind and although this species is famous for being a wanderer, its presence here in the Carolinian Life Zone at this late date seems most peculiar. Because of this, I frantically searched the horizon for a glimpse of the flock, to check the flight pattern to confirm the identification. Finally, I located four birds, circling back to the house and they eventually flew to the elm tree in our yard where they remained for at least a half hour. Here they remained very quietly and seemed to be feeding on something among the leaves in the top of the tree. One of them carried a band on its right leg. This alone is enough to excite any bander. Of course, it could have been one of the two we had trapped in a water-drip trap and banded on March 2nd. Red Crossbills are attracted to water as they were noted on the ground several times this winter, drinking from the puddles in our driveway. Although I did not hear any singing Crossbills this year, one sang in the yard several years ago and it is a very beautiful song.

June 11, 1970 ... Other late Red Crossbills were recorded this year also. EBBA member Betty Vossler saw four today in the Forrest Hills area of Wheeling, W. Va. The previous late record here at Clarksville was a single banded bird on May 10, 1964. Although this species is considered a resident of the Canadian Life Zone, the late dates mentioned above make one wonder if they did not occasionally nest in this area, years ago, when the country was completely forest covered and evergreens were predominant in many places.

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