

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



May 2, 1971 ... Fabulous is the word to best describe the EBBA weekend in Charleston, South Carolina. The local arrangements committee headed by William McIntosh, Jr., and T.A. Beckett III did a wonderful job making this a memorable weekend for everyone. Everything dovetailed together perfectly to make the meeting a complete success - excellent accommodations, good weather, a fine program and lots of birds.

Yesterday there were 2 field trips scheduled for 7 A.M. Both were to famous plantations in the area. I was in the group that went to the John Henry Dick plantation. A hint of things to come was evident as we drove down the long entrance drive. The driveway was lined with huge Live Oaks, all heavily draped with Spanish Moss. The massive lower limbs of those oaks grew out over the roadway, forming an arch as the outer branches almost touched the ground. It was all very impressive.

John Henry Dick is an artist, naturalist, world traveler and a most gracious host. We were welcome to tour the modern home and grounds (the original mansion had burned down many years ago). The 800 acre plantation has many kinds of habitat - cropland, pasture, woodland, savannah marshes, and fresh water ponds. A small area is allocated for the development of rare waterfowl imported from each of the five continents.

Purple Martins were flying about the artistic martin box out on the huge front lawn and Painted Buntings were coming to the bird feeder near the house. The Painted Bunting was a new life bird for me and when I saw two males fighting in one of the open fields, I decided this has to be one of the most beautiful birds in the world.

Another new bird for me at this place was the Anhinga, often called the Water-Turkey because of its large size and the shape of its tail. Larry Hood and I were standing near one of the ponds discussing the problems of the banding office now that Earl Baysinger is moving on to new fields, when a large long-necked bird circled and landed in a tree nearby. There was no difficulty in identifying it as it immediately opened up its wings in a picture book pose, very much as Carol Rudy's rendition at the beginning of this story.

It was quite evident that everyone was impressed with our field trip to the Dick plantation and someone suggested that I ask various EBBA members to express their sentiments in a few words of what they really thought about our visit. The response was immediate and here are some of the comments - 800 acres of heaven - a gracious talented host who overwhelmed the EBBA members present - a glimpse into yesteryear - I am speechless - had to pinch myself to believe it - no city smog - fabulous - very interesting - invigorating - a fascinating area - so many things to see - the lovely Live Oaks - the wealth of birds - the epitome of all this - magnificent - a breathtaking spot to spend an early morning in spring ... and the praises rolled on and on.

With yesterdays field trips still quite fresh in our minds, we were treated to another exciting one this morning. At 7 a.m. we met at the Museum and then drove to an "open" pine woods where we could see and also hear the calls of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. This woodpecker seems very strict in its habitat requirements and apparently will only nest in holes they have excavated in a living pine tree that has begun to rot at the core. They want a living pine tree so that by puncturing the bark around the entrance to the nesting cavity the gum (resin) can be kept flowing freely. It all looks like a sticky mess but evidently through the process of evolution this has offered protection against predators. On Friday evening Mr. Beckett and Mr. Langston had given us an excellent talk about this rather rare and local woodpecker and we were shown slides of its unusual nesting habits. Numerous calls of Brown-headed Nuthatches (another new bird for me) were also heard in the same pine woods and I spent so much time to get a good look at one that when I came out to the road most of the group had left for another nesting area. Mr. E.C. Clyde of Effingham, S.C., had room for me in his car and I went with his group but he knew the area well and took us to a cypress swamp where several Prothonotary Warblers were singing. Mr. Clyde then drove to the Atlantic coast where we had a good look at an Am. Oystercatcher, another "first" for me as were the Cattle Egrets we later saw along the road. By adding the five Brown Pelicans we saw earlier, I added 7 new "lifers" to my list. To a land-lubber living north of the Mason and Dixon line, this was quite a weekend.

May 31 ... This will be a follow up report on the Sparrow Hawk nesting tragedy reported in the Diary last year in the September-October 1970 issue. On May 9th of this year, I checked the Sparrow Hawk box here on the farm and noted 5 eggs, but today the box was empty. I'll probably

never know whether the eggs were thin shelled and were broken by the weight of the adults, were malformed or incapable of developing, or some predator had found the nest.

It had been suggested that perhaps the basic cause of nesting failure of our Sparrow Hawks last spring was the result of pesticides, used in their wintering grounds instead of the herbicide used here on our farm to control the Canadian Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*). While this is entirely possible, it seems strange that there was never a nesting failure before herbicide was used.

Usually, especially in the past few years, one of our Sparrow Hawks has wintered here. And now it appears that I have been lax in some important record keeping since I never kept a record as to whether it was a male or female that stayed here on the farm in the winter time the past two years. If it were the female that did not migrate then the evidence would point strongly to the herbicide as the cause for nesting failure.

In spite of a nesting failure 2 years in a row, the adults are still here and developments will be checked closely in the future, Sparrow Hawks may mate for life and I will try and check on this possibility. Their attachment to a particular nesting site is evidently very strong and it will be interesting to see how strong this attachment really is.

Sparrow Hawks have always nested here for many years and usually the migrants arrive from the south around March 10, depending on the weather at that time. I often fail to detect the arrival date or forget to write it down, but checking back through my notes I have found several interesting comments. One, dated Mar 9, 1963 - 10 a.m. The first Sparrow Hawk has evidently just arrived. It came in out of the south and flew over our yard...going straight to its nest tree and alighting on a top branch. It remained motionless for over an hour and seemed very tired. They never use this tree as a perch when looking for food but use the nearby electric poles and wires. On March 13, 1964, three Sp. Hawks were in the nest tree at 7:35 am, and stayed close-by all day. There were four flying around and calling in the evening and some may have spent the night in the recess created where the cross arms are fastened to the electric pole. I have known bluebirds to nest there also. Our wintering Sparrow Hawk usually sleeps under the eaves of one of the buildings of the farm and I caught one once and checked his band. Roosting places of birds can be a fascinating subject.

Another notation on March 11, 1966 states: A Sparrow Hawk guarding the nest box all day and keeping all Starling at a distance. When the female does appear, quite a ritual takes place. The male will fly in wide circles over and around where the female is perched. In some respects these mating flights remind me of the Upland Plover flight when young are nearby. The wing tips are bent downward and quivering continually and a shrill piercing cry is often given. Once heard it will never be forgotten.

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