

## SOME EXPERIENCES WITH LARGER-MESH NETS

By Bruce Adams

In 1965, before the Operation Recovery season, I purchased one of the Bleitz #11 mist nets, which is described in their price list as suitable for "larger shore birds, small hawks, etc.". For those who may never have seen one of these nets, they are similar to ordinary songbird nets except that the mesh is much larger (4") and the material is much heavier, almost as thick as the trammel line on a songbird net. The pockets are somewhat deeper although in length and height it is about the same as the smaller mesh nets. I had seen one of these nets only a couple of times before and had little idea of what to expect; I purchased the first one on an experimental basis. I was so impressed with the performance of the first net in trials at Island Beach that for the 1966 O.R. I bought four more of them.

It was in 1966 that I had an opportunity to really gain some experience with the nets and evaluate the pros and cons of using them. That year, during the O.R. season at Island Beach, I used anywhere from two to five of these nets, placing them in several locations - marsh, mud flats, and in the regular net lanes where the songbird nets are placed. Altogether that year, the #11 nets captured 173 Flickers, 3 Kingfishers, 6 Pigeon Hawks, one Marsh Hawk, and 2 Long-eared Owls, in addition to several smaller birds. Interesting captures with the single #11 net in 1965 included about half of my 84 Flickers; one Meadowlark, 2 Pigeon Hawks, and an American Bittern. In 1967, with much less time and fewer net-hours, I caught 22 Flickers, 3 Pigeon Hawks, and one Woodcock and one Black-crowned Night Heron.

Persons using these nets for the first time, especially at a coastal O.R. station or other locality where there will be larger water birds, will soon find that there are advantages and disadvantages in using them. To take the advantages first: this net is designed for capturing larger birds and that is exactly what it does - captures larger birds. The Operation Recovery program mainly concerns the smaller landbirds, but it is always interesting, and adds a little excitement to the day's routine, to capture a fully-grown heron, large hawk, or owl, which one is not likely to trap in a typical back-yard banding station. And as everyone knows, the recovery potential is much higher on the larger birds - I have had two recoveries of the 13 Pigeon Hawks I have banded at Island Beach. Those who have worked at O.R. stations have had the experience of seeing Flickers hit the smaller nets in large numbers and often escape - in large numbers - before the bander can run up and grab them. If you should happen to be interested in Flickers, as I am, and wish to capture them in large numbers, this is the net to use.

To give an example of the comparative performance of these nets in capturing this particular species: on Oct. 7, 1966, at Island Beach, six

banders including myself operated 32 nets and banded 1295 birds in 218 net hours. Of this total there were 47 Flickers of which I caught 45 - the other five banders combined caught only two Flickers. All my captures were made with three #11 nets. I have never seen a Flicker escape from one of these nets after hitting it. The same is undoubtedly true of Pigeon Hawks - in 1966 the station total was nine, of which I captured six, even though some banders spent more time and more net-hours at Island Beach than I did.

Now to the disadvantages: generally speaking, although this is not a hard and fast rule, birds of any size which get caught in this net will become more entangled more quickly than is the case with songbird nets. There seems to be a strong tendency for birds almost immediately to become entangled in the shelf below the shelf in which they are first caught. This is probably because of the deeper pockets and the larger mesh, in which just one strand around a bird's body will tend to lead to greater entanglement. Hence the bander will probably find taking birds from this net somewhat more time-consuming than with songbird nets.

Through trial and experimentation I have found a few shortcuts to make removal of the birds easier. One is that I am somewhat more liberal in the use of scissors to cut strands of netting, than I am with nets of finer mesh. I was very hesitant about this at first, having always been told that scissors should be used only as a last resort, but I believe there are some sound reasons for being more liberal in this respect with the #11 net: (1) there is almost no possibility of leaving netting buried in the bird's plumage - the netting is so large and conspicuous and you don't need to cut out whole chunks of it, only occasional strands; (2) the net is very easy to repair, as the heavy strands are easy to tie and work with and holes are easily located; and (3) often the cutting of only a couple of key strands around a bird's wing or body will mean the difference between a quick extraction or a slow and frustrating procedure. One memorable exception was my Black-crowned Night Heron of 1966, in which I watched a masterful job of bird removal by Tom Davis who was visiting from the Tobay O.R. This took place late at night, with only my flashlight for illumination; Tom managed without a single strand being cut.

Most small birds, the size of a Catbird or smaller, will not get caught in the #11 net. But when there are a great many around, such as on a day of a heavy thrush flight, there will always be some which will be caught, and the small birds seem to get just as badly tangled as the large ones. I have caught many thrushes, Catbirds, Sapsuckers, Red-winged Blackbirds, and similar-sized birds in these nets; the smallest I have ever caught was a Junco. In removing these birds I encountered the same difficulties and problems as in removing the larger ones. Then one day, while watching smaller birds flying in the area of the net, I noticed that most of them, even of Catbird size, flew right through the net, through one mesh. Warblers and other very small birds often fly up to the net, perch

on the netting inside one mesh for a moment, and then continue on. It suddenly occurred to me that if these birds could fly through one mesh head first, why not try to remove the captured ones head first, right through the net? The determining factor in whether a thrush or Catbird would get caught seemed to be not a "fat" bird compared to a "thin" bird, but rather the angle at which the bird hit and the amount and slackness of the netting in the exact spot where it hit. Anyway, I tried the "head-first" removal and was amazed at the instant success. I have used this method ever since on small birds in the #11 net and have yet to have a casualty or injury in a "head-first" removal.

The steps I take in this type of removal are as follows: first, disregard completely the side of the net into which the bird flew. Don't bother even trying to figure it out, but simply find the bird's head and work from that side. It is essential to have a probing device such as a knitting needle to push the netting over and down the bird's body; I use a small surgical clamp. I usually start by holding the bird by the body until at least one wing is free. As the netting is pushed down and over the body, I usually end up holding the bird in what could be described as a "reversal" of the position when using the "Dater" method of removing birds from songbird nets. That is, the thumb of the left hand is over the bird's back, two, three or four fingers under the breast, and the bird's head resting on (or biting) the palm of the hand. In a routine "Dater" removal, the bird's tail would be in the palm of the hand. (See EBBA News Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 18-19 for a description of Eleanor Dater's method of removing birds from nets).

Soon only the feet and tail will remain tangled. Depending upon how badly the bird was tangled, you will probably end up bringing the bird through several meshes, and when the bird is out there will be a portion of netting all matted and bunched together, which can easily be separated just by pushing it with the hand. This may sound like a bizarre method of removing birds but it works remarkably well. It should be emphasized that before trying a "head-first" removal, make sure you know exactly what kind of net you are using. The #11 has a four-inch (stretched) mesh but there are smaller mesh nets also of heavy material designed for the larger birds.

In using the #11 net I have found it advantageous to keep the net as high as possible on the poles. The higher the net, the greater seems to be the chance of capture of the larger birds. There is also, of course, a greater tendency for the net to sag heavily with a large bird in it. I use wooden poles 1" in diameter and 14 feet long with the #11 nets - these are more difficult to carry and place in the ground than the aluminum ones, but are worth the effort to allow pushing the trammel ends quite high.

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