

Walter P. Smith couldn't talk me into visiting KIPTOPEKE this year (I could not find the time) so he sent me the paper printed below "to bring some Kiptopeke to New York". Although the following paper is written in a "diary" style, Walter is such a fascinating writer and his writing is so terrific, we have absolutely no qualms about publishing this account. When I first read it, I could not put it down until I was all finished with it. All the while, I thought back, fondly, to my own days of being in charge of a local coastal banding station, and the experiences we went through during the course of daily banding activities.

We certainly hope you'll enjoy Walt's writing as much as I did!

The Editor

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KIPTOPEKE: October 6-15, 1972
By Walter Post Smith*

Friday, October 6:

Fatty-pie (my wife) picked me up at the office at 3:00 p.m., a practice commonly referred to there as "casualing-out on Friday afternoon" and rather frowned on by the hierarchy. To be completely truthful, I suppose I didn't really have to leave at that time, but with the unbelievably good news about the re-opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel just the day before, I guess the old adrenalin was surging. I figured that if we could get the car loaded by 4:00 p.m., we could leave home in time to meet John and Nancy Pond at the Motel, have a short "happy-hour", and enjoy Crab Imperial at Paul's Restaurant in Cheriton that night!

It had been only several weeks before, that during a severe Northeaster, a large barge had broken loose from its tug, crashed into the Bridge-Tunnel complex about two miles North of its Southern end, and so severely damaged it at five points that the Bridge-Tunnel had been closed to vehicular traffic. This was indeed an unexpected jolt to our Fall banding project at Kiptopeke Beach. Suddenly, those of us in the Southeastern part of Virginia, who frequently made the fifty-mile or less trip to Kiptopeke to help with the operation, were faced with a trip of over 400 miles up to Annapolis, Md., across the Bay Bridge there, and down the long Md.-Va., Eastern Shore to our banding station at its Southern tip at Kiptopeke. Since this meant that the BIC [Bander-in-charge] could no longer count on emergency help on "big" days, our operation was subject to drastically reduced activity!

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You can imagine my relief when the papers announced on Thursday that the Bridge-Tunnel would be reopened for traffic with only one-lane restriction for about two of the seventeen miles.

F.-pie had been packing off-and-on all week, and since most of the equipment such as collecting boxes, nets, poles, etc. had been transported to the station when it was opened on September 2, I figured it wouldn't take long to load the trunk, lock-up the house -- and take off.

The guys at the office had been kidding me all day about the weather predictions for rain over the weekend. Sure enough, by the time I had ticked off the last item on my check-list and was backing out of the driveway, F.-pie remarked on the suspicious-looking wet specks on the windshield. I replied, rather hollowly, "Probably just pre-frontal activity of the cold front due tonight--we'll probably be loaded with birds in the morning". This astute observation elicited no reply as F.-pie, exhausted from one of her usual busy days, had settled back for "forty-winks", and I was left with my own thoughts.

As I stopped at the Bridge-Tunnel Toll Plaza, I could see a line of cars ahead, waiting to proceed. I had no more than pulled into the line, when it started moving forward--That I took as a good omen for the coming week! The two-mile stretch of one-way traffic at 25 miles per hour moved steadily, and I am sure required no more than ten minutes longer than normal. The damaged bridge sections were in various states of repair and were easily discernible. Then the traffic pattern stretched out, and as the car settled down into that undulating rocking-chair motion that anyone who has driven over the Bridge-Tunnel will recognize, my thoughts raced ahead through the intermittent showers to the Banding Station.

How had the birds and the weather treated Mike Mitchell, the reigning BIC? Who would we find there tonight--and tomorrow --and next week which was to be ours? This was the end of the fifth week of our six-weeks operation this year, and Mike had reported, at mid-week, that the running total was about 4500 individuals of 90 species.

That had to be considered rather disappointing in light of last years totals of 9680 individuals of 102 species, and it appeared that even if we had a "super" week, with upwards of 2000 banded, we would still fall far short of the last years totals.

F.-pie came to the surface just as I pulled into the Peacock Motor Inn and we soon were relaxing at the "happy-hour". Dorothy and Mike Mitchell lamented being rained out for the day, but proudly reported their banding 'goodies' for the week--

a Screech Owl and an unbelievable Marsh Hawk! As few Marsh Hawks as we see at the Banding Station, imagine the thrill of having one hang-up in a net and of being able to band it! It was not only a new species for the year, but a new one for the ten years of operation.

I avidly checked through the field summary of species banded each day, with the thought in mind of seeing what had, and conversely, had not shown up so far this year. As compiler of the annual Station summaries, I find this data fascinating, particularly since it can vary so widely from year to year. The Myrtle Warblers and Kinglets appeared to be late in arriving this year, and the various Sparrows just really had not started through at all. From all reports I had had from the Banding Station, the Coastal Raptor migration was considerably down this Fall, with no reports of days on which Kestrels and Sharpies streamed by overhead all day long, such as had occurred in past years.

So, I was a little surprised to note that Mike had banded fourteen Sharpies the past week, and must admit to considerable envy, since most of my past banding had been at the start of the operation, before the Sharpies arrived.

When the demands of the hungry banders outweighed those of the thirsty new-arrivals, we piled into two cars and set off through the rain for Paul's Restaurant in Cheriton where, as I suspected, I had not forgotten how delicious Paul's Crab Imperial was!

Back at the Motel, the late weather report was certainly not too reassuring. The cold front we had been expecting that night seemed to have stalled on the Allegheny ridges, and a low pressure area had formed off Cape Hatteras and was driving up the coast, with a simple prediction of "Rain, at times heavy" for Saturday.

"Oh, well", I thought, "things just might change during the night". And as I dropped off to sleep, it was like cutting on a Color T.V. -- there in front of me were Kinglets and White-throated Sparrows hitting the nets--so real I could almost feel them on my fingertips. And I don't mean one or two, either-- I mean a dozen or so in each net!

Saturday, October 7:

It was 4:45 a.m. when my eyes finally popped open for good. I thought, disgustedly, "things are normal--I just never seem to sleep well at Kiptopeke, either from excitement or anticipation". I lay there, collecting my thoughts, and dimly remembered, as I had turned over several times during the night, hearing the rain pittering down and the wind sighing through the trees. Now, I suddenly became aware that there was no sound outside--

not even a drip from the Motel eaves. This thought spurred me up out of the covers, and I hurriedly stepped into some pants and slipped out of the door.

From what direction was the wind coming? There appeared to be none at all, and no stars. I judged the temperature to be in the sixties. I cupped my ears and listened in vain for overhead "peeps" of migrants and as I turned back to my room I could feel a suggestion of moisture on my cheek.

I performed my morning ablutions, painfully prodded F.-pie out of bed, and we settled back with coffee and sticky buns to await the BIC's decision. Presently, Mike tapped on the door and announced that, in spite of the dire weather predictions, we might as well go on down to the Station and sort of play it by ear from there.

The sky was lightening rapidly and the woods were quiet as a tomb as we made the rounds of the nets, opening them. I had promised John and Nancy Pond faithfully that if they kept coming (their visits on two previous years were on days that were complete "duds") they would be bound to hit a "big" one-- and my instincts for the day kept shouting, "No, not again!"

The wind was from the Northeast and picking up steadily, but the birds were pretty slow, and obviously it would be that kind of day. John was pleased when we brought in a female Blue Grosbeak, one of the three we were to get for the year, and we had two early Sharpies. They always kid Mitchell Byrd and me at the Station-- when 8:00 a.m. comes, we always take off for breakfast, in spite of the birds. Let's just say I'm convinced that I operate much more efficiently on a full stomach. So, when that magic hour arrived, we had netted only about 25 individuals, the Ponds and Smiths headed for the breakfast table.

It was about 9:00 a.m. as we headed back for the Station, and the weather had thickened and the clouds were dripping. We found that the BIC had given up for the day, and all the nets were furled. We headed back to the Motel to await weather developments, and on the way the skies opened up and it really poured. That pretty well decided our course of action, and John and I scrounged up a Bridge table and offered to give Nancy and F.-pie a lesson. John and I played magnificently, but the girls were lucky and somehow managed to beat the daylight out of us. That afternoon Nancy and F.-pie went shopping in the metropolis of Cape Charles while John and I watched the ball games.

The "happy-hour" that night was the occasion for the official change of command, which Mike accomplished simply by dropping an armfull of previous records and unused field sheets on my bed with a terse "They're all yours". And so I shouldered

that delightful, but sometimes nerve-wracking, responsibility of "BIC for the week". I noted that for the day we had banded 32 birds of 15 species, with 3 repeats and no returns or foreign recoveries.

We had our evening meal at Paul's, as usual, and upon leaving were all pleased to discover that the wind had shifted to Northwest and the temperature was dropping.

That night we all gathered in the Mitchell's room and several of us showed slides that we had taken of birds. I particularly remember a great one Henry Beilstein showed of a group of Common and King Eiders, including an easily recognizable adult male of each species. Amazingly, it had been taken last Winter from one of the Bridge-Tunnel islands!

As we trooped back to our rooms and beds, I'm sure each one of us was savoring that Northwest wind, convinced that tomorrow would be a Flight Day.

Sunday, October 8:

I awoke early, as usual, and when I slipped outside, could feel a cold crispness that had been lacking the day before--and the stars winked brightly at me. I could hear no "peeps", but with the weather change, the birds must have moved!

We left the Motel at 6:10 a.m., and as we drove down to the Station I was faced with my first decision as BIC - there were eight of us on duty this morning, and how many of our 41 nets should I open? I decided to be a little conservative and not open the 4 Beach nets until I had a feel for the bird movement last night.

The woods were quiet as we opened the nets, and although we were getting some early birds, by 7:00 I was sure it would not be a "big" day, and ordered the Beach nets opened. It turned out to be one of those great days when there were enough birds to keep us busy, but not too many to keep us from studying individuals and taking pictures leisurely. There were a remarkable number of Sharpies overhead and in the woods--more, it seemed to me, than I ever remembered before. By 8:00 when we left for breakfast, I had banded four, and everyone was reporting the frustration of seeing them fly up out of the net pockets before they could get to them,

When we got back from breakfast I found that Dorothy Mitchell had banded two more Sharpies for me, rather than hold them and collecting boxes had a moderate assortment for me to work on. We caught our first Field Sparrow for the year, and the birds dribbled in steadily until we furled the nets at 4:00 p.m.

That evening at the "happy-hour" we tallied-up for the day and recorded 150 individuals of 31 species, with 16 repeats and no returns or foreign recoveries. But the truly outstanding item was the 14 Sharpies I had banded! Strangely enough, 13 of them were males, and I think I can conservatively say that at least 50 of them must have been seen in, or hitting, the nets during the day. Last year the most we banded on anyone day was two. Wow!

That night about 10:00, I was watching T.V. and F.-pie had already dozed off, when a tap came on the door. It was Fred Scott, letting me know he was available for tomorrow. He and his family had been visiting in Virginia Beach over the weekend, when he diagnosed the favorable weather reports and decided they could get along without him.

So as I dropped off to sleep, it was with the shining thought that tomorrow just had to be "it", because Fred Scott always shows up on the Flight Days.

Monday, October 9:

When I slipped out of our room to "sniff the wind" at 5:15 a.m., Fred was there before me. We could hear a few "peeps" overhead, which Fred recognized as Warblers, but disappointingly few. However, it seemed to me that the air was charged with expectancy (or was it I?), and over our coffee and buns I assured John and Nancy that today was gonna be that "big" day I had been promising them for three years.

We drove down to the Station nine strong that morning, where we found three additional helpers waiting for us, who had driven over that morning from Newport News. With good help and good weather predictions, I cast caution to the winds and passed the word to open all the nets!

I was a little chagrined when the nets didn't fill with a rush at full daylight (the usual pattern), but the volume increased steadily and I knew, regretfully, by 8:00 a.m. that I would have to forego my breakfast. At 9:00 the Myrtle Warblers started hitting the Beach nets, and by 10:00 the net-tenders were bringing them back to the banding area 20-30 at a time.

At 11:00 a.m. I cast an apprehensive eye at the bulging collecting boxes, hurried down to the Beach with a request for Fred to clear and furl those nets, and return to Headquarters to help with the banding. At 2:00 p.m. Fred and I were banding steadily and the collecting boxes were still almost full, so I straightened my aching back long enough to order the remaining nets furled for the day.

John and Nancy Pond left shortly thereafter for their home in Bethesda, Md., delightfully satiated, I suspect, with removing

birds from the nets. Most of the others followed suit before long, and when we closed the Station at 5:00 p.m., it was a weary group of three who headed back to the Motel, with something over 900 birds banded for the day!

A hot shower and a short "happy-hour" picked us up some, but I later remarked to F.-pie that I was really so tired I couldn't properly appreciate Paul's Salmon Trout for dinner, and I still had a long evening ahead making the number of each species total the number of birds banded. It was 10:30 p.m. before I finally succeeded, and as I leaned wearily back in my chair I thought, "What a day!" We had banded 904 birds of 45 species, with no returns or foreign recoveries. I am still amazed at some of the totals that day: Along with the not-unexpected 481 Myrtle Warblers, were 20 Red-eyed Vireos, 9 Tennessee Warblers, 15 Parula Warblers, 83 Black-throated Blue Warblers, 49 American Redstarts, 16 Magnolia Warblers, 36 Yellowthroats and 31 Swainson's Thrushes. We had one new species for the year, a Bewick's Wren, and only 4 Sharpies (I never thought the day would come when I said only 4 Sharpies!). Fred had banded 350 Myrtles and I had banded the remaining 445 birds.

As I stretched slowly out on the bed, I barely had time to guiltily subdue the traitorous thought that maybe it wasn't worth it to band 554 birds in one day--when I was out like a light.

Tuesday, October 10:

Not surprisingly, the alarm clock awoke me, for a change, at 5:00 a.m., for I still had yesterday's summary sheet to fill out. With that completed I awoke F.-pie, and as we discussed our plans for the day over coffee and buns, I issued my first edict of the day: Since we were but three strong, and the day following a Flight Day is usually a very productive one, we would only open up the 14 nets nearest the banding area to start with, and play it by ear after that.

The wind was light from the Northeast as we opened the nets in the gray dawn light, and we could hear a few chirps and rustlings in the woods. The birds were just beginning to hit the nets pretty good when a Station Wagon with five more helpers arrived at 7:30 a.m. from Newport News. I decided to open 23 more nets--all but the 4 on the Beach.

It proved to be a busy day; not hectic, as the preceding one, but about 10:00 a.m. the birds slowed rather abruptly and we opened the remaining 4 nets on the Beach. When it came time to furl the nets for the day, F.-pie and I were alone, and I had banded just over 400 birds. I asked her to close the nets "out front" and on the Beach, and I would take those at the banding area and on the "Main Line".

Arriving at the Main Line, I turned right and could see a bird about 200 yards down the lane, struggling in the net. It suddenly hit me, "That's a pretty big bird - I wonder what it could be" - With that I broke into what F.-pie describes as "an increase in my normal, leisurely pace", but which I dignify as a "run". Anyhow, I arrived in time to triumphantly grasp a Sharpie. Imagine my surprise to discover that it was banded! "Probably one I banded earlier in the day", I thought as I headed back for the banding area - then realized the band was on the right leg! That meant it wasn't mine, but maybe Mike Mitchell's. I checked through the entire list of bands used at Kiptopeke - it wasn't there. What I had was a foreign recovery of a Sharpshinned Hawk!

Considering the rare incidence of any foreign recovery, one of a Sharpie just had to be tops! I could hardly wait for F.-pie to get back from the Beach so I could show her my prize. Would you believe it? She wasn't even excited, and proceeded to bring me rudely back to Earth by inquiring, matter-of-factly, if the Main Line nets were still open!

We were later than usual getting back to the Motel and wondered if the Warfields, who had written they would arrive on Tuesday, were there yet. When they hadn't shown by 6:30 p.m., we proceeded to Cheriton and Paul's for our usual meal. They joined us at our table later, having stopped at Chincoteague that afternoon to birdwatch.

Ben helped me that night with the talley-sheet. The daily totals proved to be 417 individuals of 40 species, with 18 repeats, 1 return and 1 foreign recovery. Aside from our startling foreign recovery, the highlights were perhaps the two, late Yellow-bellied Cuckoos, 48 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 28 Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and, of course, 203 Myrtle Warblers.

Wednesday, October 11:

The weather predictions were for the wind to shift from Northwest to Southeast in the early morning, so when I slipped out to "sniff the weather" I was pleased to note the wind in the Northwest. This meant that some birds should have moved during the night and our day would be interesting.

We opened all the nets at dawn, since I knew a group was coming over from Newport News. It was one of those "perfect" days, with a good rush of birds in the morning, but still time enough for breakfast, photography and chatting.

About mid-morning, someone came back to the banding area with a banded Flicker, calling my attention to the "old" band on its leg. This proved to be another foreign recovery, making it two days in a row! The wind did shift during the day to

Southeast, and the birds dwindled to nothing in the late afternoon.

That night when we tallied-up, the total reflected 192 birds of 26 species, with 17 repeats, no returns and 1 foreign recovery. Of the 192 banded, 99 were Myrtle Warblers.

Thursday, October 12:

As we drove down to the Station, our normal air of expectancy was completely missing that morning. What with the Southwest wind all night we just weren't anticipating much movement of migrants.

Silence greeted us as we opened the nets, and by breakfast time at 8:00 a.m., I had banded only a dozen birds. Things remained slow all day, with even the Beach nets yielding only an occasional Myrtle.

That night when we prepared the summary, it proved to be our lowest day for the week, with only 53 birds banded of 16 species, and 17 repeats, no returns or foreign recoveries.

But the weather predictions noted two approaching cold fronts, one of which was due that night.

Friday, October 13:

As I slipped out to test the weather, I wondered, idly, if there were anything to the old superstition of Friday 13th. The cold front had obviously come through during the night since the wind was from the North. But the question was, had it come through early enough for a Flight to occur?

We had the answer to that question shortly after the nets were opened. My hopes for another "big" day proved unfounded, and with added help from Norfolk and Hampton, it turned out to be a "comfortable" day.

There was even time for the BIC to make a few rounds of the net lanes, from one of which I returned with an Orange-crowned Warbler, only our second one for the Fall Operation.

After the nets were closed for the day, F.-pie and I were the last to leave. As I climbed into the car and stepped on the starter, I was greeted by a "clunk!" I repeated the procedure with the same results, and realized that I had a dead battery! There was nothing to do but walk over to the home of the caretaker for the old Tourinns Motel, borrow his phone, and put in an SOS for help from a service station up the road. The prognosis was a dead cell which would probably cause further trouble. Since Kiptopeke is no place for the BIC to be caught

without transportation, I bought a new battery. "Friday the 13th" I thought bitterly.

That night "happy-hour" was much better attended, since the vanguard was arriving for the last, big weekend, and we needed the big table at the back of Paul's Restaurant for our evening meal.

The summary that night proved easy to verify, and reflected 154 birds of 21 species, with 19 repeats, 1 return and no foreign recoveries.

Many thoughts crowded sleep from my mind as I went to bed. Tomorrow everyone would be there in anticipation of the break-up of the operation on Sunday. What sort of day would it be? The wind was presently in the North, but it was predicted to shift to the Southeast during the night. Would enough birds move before the shift to allow us to take advantage of all the help available tomorrow? I finally drifted off to sleep.

Saturday, October 14:

The wind was light from the Southeast as we headed for the Station that morning but what time it had shifted remained to be seen. As I moved down the Main Line opening nets in the half light, I could hear the woods stirring all around me, and I thought, with rising excitement, "They're definitely here!" I hurried back to the banding area to do some organizing, asking F.-pie to be my traffic director and see, as nearly as possible, that the species were separated in the collection boxes.

Then I eased down into the BIC's chair, prepared for a busy day of concentrated effort. I remember thinking, when I was ordering my supply of bands for this Fall, that I was being foolishly optimistic in making sure I had 2000 of size "0" bands. About 10:00 a.m. I suddenly realized that I had only about 150 left of those 2000, and hastily asked Fred Scott and Mike Mitchell to use their bands on all Myrtle Warblers from then on.

I got a slight break from my busy routine when our 5-year-old Grandson, Lewis, who had come over for the day with our son Godfrey, came up to me about 11:00 a.m. and whispered in my ear. "Granddaddy, do you think it would be alright if Grandmama took me and Mark down on the Beach to make a fort?" I replied very solemnly, "Lewis, it's been pretty clear that ever since you and your brother Mark showed up, your Grandmama paid no more attention to me. Now, that must mean that she loves you more than me, and that's bound to make it alright". He trotted off happily and F.-pie told me later that he was completely fascinated by my reply and assured her several times that morning, "Grandmama, we don't need to go back and help Granddaddy 'cause he said you loved me more than him!"

Everyone stayed busy. In fact, I ordered the nets closed at 3:00 p.m. so the banders could finish up at a decent hour. When we closed up the Station we had banded over 750 birds!

The "happy-hour" that night was the biggest yet and we had quite a crowd make the last run up to Paul's for supper. I had my only repeat meal for the week, my favorite, Crab Imperial.

There was plenty of help that night with the summary, and it turned out we had banded 754 birds of 37 species, with 19 repeats, 1 return and no foreign recoveries. It was really Myrtle day, with 568 banded, but we were still getting an amazing variety of other Warblers, and it appeared that the Sparrows were just beginning to come through. Two White-crowned Sparrows were new for the year.

Sunday, October 15:

When I slipped out of the door early, I could feel no wind and wondered what had become of the predicted cold front during the night.

This caused much tongue-wagging as we headed down to the Station. When we arrived, we were amazed to find the wind there blowing steadily from the Northwest at 20 m.p.h., gusting up to 35 m.p.h.

You can imagine what that did to our nets. All the net-tenders were soon frustrated from watching the birds bounce off those nets, belled out by the wind. By 11:00 a.m. the birds had tapered off to a trickle and I ordered the Station closed.

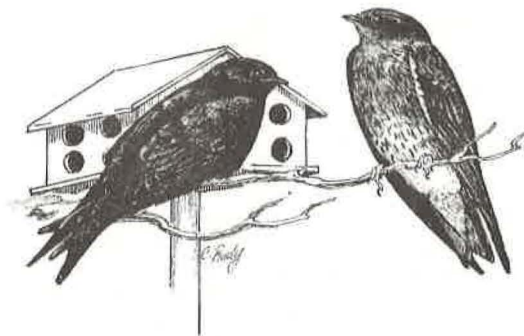
Everyone fell to, dismantling the nets and packing up their equipment. I'm always sure every year when we close that I'll never get all the nets, poles, collecting boxes, screen tent, chairs, table, etc. in our car, but between a big trunk, the back seat and a car-top carrier, we made it again.

While we were eating lunch I made a quick check on the day's and week's results. For the day we had 167 birds of 23 species, with 19 repeats and no returns or foreign recoveries. For the week, we had banded an amazing 2790 birds of 61 species. As for me, the 27 Sharpies for the week was unbelievable, and the 2790 birds brought our total for the year to a respectable 7331.

There was nothing left but to make farewells all around, climb into our cars and head homeward. As we left the toll booth and headed South on the Bridge-Tunnel, I thought back over the week. It was certainly the best, or perhaps I should say the most productive, week I had ever had at Kiptopeke.

As I relive it, my cup runneth over.

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A BIRD BANDER'S DIARY
By Ralph K. Bell

In the previous issue of *A Bird Bander's Diary*, we covered June 1972, the aftermath of Hurricane Agnes and the effect this awful storm had on the Purple Martin population. Death losses were easily tallied because this species nests in many of the backyards near houses and many birders reported their losses to me. While I covered some of the effects of the storm on my colonies, the following paragraphs deal with the effects of the storm on colonies of my friends and acquaintances:

All Purple Martin owners in the area had sad reports. One found 14 dead adults in the yard and only two flying around. Another reported 54 dead young and 46 cold eggs. Another reported 42 dead young in one box. Another reported 59 dead young in his boxes and yet another birder reported only two adult survivors from 48 pair with the lawn full of dead birds on Friday, June 23, 1972. The largest colony in the county (5 boxes and over 150 pair) reported a dozen or so adults survived.

EBBA Member Bob McCullough wrote me that there were approx. 80 dead young in 3 boxes near his home in northern New Jersey. Published report in the *Purple Martin Capital News* (Vol.7, No.7), indicates that the same situation existed over a 5-state area (more than 150,000 square miles with Pittsburgh, Pa., being near the center of the Purple Martin disaster area). Mr. Larry Zeleny of Hyattsville, Md., had an article in the same publication about his martin colony during and after the heavy rains and I would like to quote part of it....."Saturday, June 24, dawned cold but clear. It was too cold for any insects to fly. There were still feeble sounds of martin babies in the wooden house which we hadn't lowered previously because to do so is a major operation. Late that morning we solicited the needed help and lowered the massive wooden house to a height of eight feet where we could get to it easily with a stepladder. We found it