

KIPTOPEKE IN SPRING - 1972

By Walter Post Smith

For the uninitiated, Kiptopeke lies at the Southern extremity of that peninsula known as the Eastern Shore of Virginia. It is an area where there is an unbelievable concentration of southward migrating birds in autumn along the Atlantic Flyway. A group of Virginia banders has run a Banding Station there for the last nine falls and averaged something like 10,000 birds banded of 100 species in a period of six or seven weeks.

Now, I have always believed, personally, that Kiptopeke is "just slightly below Heaven", and even a slow day of birdbanding is "pure pleasure". Having so readily exposed my bias, it may be more easily understood why I maintain that my first venture at sampling the Spring migration at Kiptopeke left me, paradoxically, both frustrated and yet rewarded.

I went into this fully aware that my banding associates thought that I was wasting my time, but I felt deeply that the only way to be sure of the Spring banding situation was to try it. I should emphasize at this point that my venture can hardly be considered a fair trial of Spring banding, since it extended only from May 6 through May 14. Of those nine days, we were rained out on two, had strong winds in the Northern sector on five, and that left just two days with gentle winds in the Southern sector which we deemed to be the most favorable for northward-migrating birds.

For those of you who are acquainted with our Fall operation at Kiptopeke, I might say that this was a comparatively small operation- sixteen nets as opposed to forty in the Fall. Our staff was composed of myself as bander, my wife Doris, who is wonderful in the way she puts up with my selfish banding enthusiasm, and my friend, Jose Hernandez, without whose help at the Station and daily provision of transportation I would not be writing this.

Our frustration stemmed from the often-predicted lack of birds during the Spring migration. In the Fall at Kiptopeke, anything less than 100 birds per day is considered "slow", several hundred per day is considered "good" and a "super day" runs up over 1,000. Our Spring operation resulted in just 149 birds netted of 27 species, with a low day of 12 and a high of 33 birds per day! Certainly quantitatively disappointing, and yet there were definite compensations.

I sometimes think that, in the Fall, we often miss the boat in that we are usually so busy that we lack the time to fully enjoy the birds we are handling. Our Spring Operation

permitted us to leisurely examine each individual, photograph those bright plumages and even record those seen and heard in the woods and passing overhead. Jose's voracious photographic appetite far exceeded my modest diet of birds and soon included such subjects as insects, flowers, fungi, reptiles and some miscellaneous objects as yet unnamed.

Probably our biggest surprise resulted from the realization that about ten per cent of the birds we were handling were returns of birds banded during previous Falls. This group consisted of two Prairie Warblers, three White-eyed Vireos, one Hairy Woodpecker, one Yellow-shafted Flicker and one Carolina Wren. We assume these to be breeding birds locally, with the Prairie Warblers and White-eyed Vireos, of course, migratory. Interestingly, four were banded in 1971, three in 1970, and one White-eyed Vireo was banded by Dr. M.A. Byrd in 1968! The eight individuals were netted sixteen times during the week. I suspect that the proportion of returns in the Spring is so much higher than that in the Fall because the migratory local breeders have already left when we arrive on the scene in the Fall.

Hawk observations were relatively scarce during the period, being limited to several Sharp-shinned, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks, and the ever-present Ospreys, in search of, or returning with, food. We came no closer to netting one than the occasion when one of the Sharp-shins, up to its usual tricks, victimized a Yellowthroat.

One of the more interesting sidelights of our week occurred on the first day we were rained out. Jose and I were driving around in the rain exploring every little side road in the "boon docks". As we came to the end of Route 655, on the Ocean side, Jose remarked, "Hey, there's an Osprey, nesting on the ground". I immediately argued that it probably wasn't a nest, since Ospreys around here just don't nest on the ground. So, while Jose was setting up his camera equipment, I continued to study the bird through my binoculars. She was on a grassy promontory about two hundred yards away, about twenty feet from the waters edge and about twenty-four inches above the water level. The longer I looked the more I convinced myself she was nesting. Suddenly, down sailed the male Osprey with a fish in his talons and proceeded to feed her! This really excited us since we now had reason to believe that the female on the nest was incubating. With the thought that Dr. Mitchell Byrd would be interested in this occurrence in connection with his study on the Osprey status in the Chesapeake Bay Area, and that we might disturb the birds, we resisted the impulse for a much closer look.

Quite coincidentally, Dr. Byrd showed up that night at our Motel for a few days surveillance of the Eastern Shore

Ospreys, and we delightedly reported our "find". He knew the area and said he would check it out the next day. The next day, after closing the Station for the evening, Jose and I drove down for another look at our Ospreys. Imagine our chagrin when we found that, due to strong Northeast winds all day and a tide about four feet above normal, our promontory was under about two feet of water and the nest had disappeared completely! We were also disappointed to find later in the week, when we again ran into Dr. Byrd, that he had been unable to check out our nest. But -- there is a happy sequel to our little saga - after we had returned home and were projecting our photographic efforts for the week, we found that Jose had a series of slides showing the female Osprey on the nest and the male coming in to feed her. So, Jose had preserved for posterity a pictorial record of this unusual occurrence.

Another "bonus" for the week was observing migrating Hummingbirds feeding on the Japanese Honeysuckle right at the banding area. We saw only one female among the many males and there were occasions when we had as many as four in view simultaneously. As a matter of fact, one little male blundered into a net and, in spite of the difficulty of holding legs that are hardly longer than a quarter of an inch, I did get one good close-up of that beautiful, crimson gorget. The thrill for the week was a male Kentucky Warbler. It was, incidentally the first one I had ever banded and was unbelievably beautiful.

Our week's efforts yielded totals of 115 new birds banded of 27 species, with 16 returns and 18 repeats, for a total of 149 birds netted. The following is a list of the newly banded birds: Catbird, 29; Yellowthroat, 24; Prairie Warbler, 14; Indigo Bunting, 10; Cardinal, 7; House Wren, 5; Barn Swallow, 4; Mockingbird, 2; Rufous-sided Towhee, 2; Carolina Wren, 1; White-eyed Vireo, 1; White-throated Sparrow, 1; Great Crested Flycatcher, 1; Brown-headed Cowbird, 1; Starling, 1; American Redstart, 1; Kentucky Warbler, 1; Bobwhite, 1; Blackpoll Warbler, 1; Veery, 1; Long-billed Marsh Wren, 1; Black-throated Blue Warbler, 1; Eastern Meadowlark, 1; Gray-cheeked Thrush, 1; Red-eyed Vireo, 1; Pine Warbler, 1; Blue Jay, 1.

In retrospect, it was a week of fun and disappointments, and we did learn some new things. But I found myself left with the following unanswered questions:

Whatever happened to all those Myrtle Warblers I was sure I was going to band? On several days they were numerous in the trees around our Motel (located about five miles North of the Station), yet I saw and heard only one all week in the Station woods!

Was there any real significance in banding four Barn Swallows, while in nine previous years of Fall banding at

Kiptopeke we had only two single banding incidences?

Why didn't we band, or recover, more of the permanent residents such as Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice and Pine Warblers, which we band rather commonly in the Fall? I have a very distinct feeling that the ratio of birds in the nets to birds in the woods is much lower in the Spring than in the Fall.

The Meadowlark was a banding "first" for Kiptopeke. Now that I think of it, I never remember hearing or seeing one there in the Fall, yet they were common in the Station area in Spring. As permanent residents, what gives? Do they breed in one local area and winter in another?

And finally, how many, if any, of the birds we banded this Spring will show up during our Fall Operation?

3009 Chesapeake Avenue, Hampton, Va. 23361.

A SUMMARY OF SISKINS

By Margaret R. Pepper

Although we had operated a banding station in Wyncote, a suburb of Philadelphia, since 1928, our Pine Siskin banding began in 1946 with a single bird.

We were banding at 20 East Bells Mill Road, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia. There were two elm trees, a hemlock, a pine and a maple, as well as five flowering crabapple trees in the yard. A stone retaining wall separated us from the property above and a bayberry hedge atop a bank divided our place from the neighbor below us. A small flower bed and a few shrubs completed the planting. Our neighbors on either side were within fifty feet of our house. We used about eight traps. We began using two nets in 1957.

In June 1969 we moved to our present location at 445 East Abington Avenue in Chestnut Hill, about a mile and a quarter southeast of our previous home. We have more ground here because the lot is somewhat larger and the house covers less ground. The property is bounded on two sides by a hemlock hedge. The other two sides are planted fifteen feet deep with azaleas, rhododendrons, laurel, dogwood, small evergreens, holly, one or two flowering cherry and star magnolia trees. The planting is approximately twenty years old. There are three hollowed stone bird baths and two cement baths. Holly, firethorn, azaleas, andromeda, etc., are planted against the walls of the house. The trees on the place consist of one maple and twelve oaks.