

DANGERS IN BIRD BANDING

By G. D. SPROT

BECAUSE we are unaware of what is happening to a very large percentage of the birds we band, many of us are inclined to imagine that our methods are all that can be desired, and that all is well. We therefore blindly rush on encouraging others to join us without ever a thought for the birds, or the purpose for which we are banding, taking rather too literally, perhaps, the remarks of our leaders to "band all we can". At least so this would appear, when such letters as those of Dr. Rowan (*Auk*, January, 1925, p. 171) and Dr. Nelson (*Auk*, April, 1925, p. 304), on the probable harm wrought by the Government Sparrow Trap, as also Dr. Grinnell's paper, "Bird Netting as a Method in Ornithology" (*Auk*, April, 1925, p. 245), have been passed over without comment by the many who profess an interest in banding.

That there are hidden dangers connected with our work, all equally worth investigating before we go too far, must surely have appeared obvious to other banders, as well as myself, who have ever given the matter any serious thought; and I feel sure that we all would gladly welcome some proof sufficient to convince us that our fears are groundless, and that bird banding casualties on this continent are no more than might naturally be expected.

Yet Dr. Nelson's remarks in his reply to Dr. Rowan, I am sorry to say, do not convince me. I find, for instance, that Dr. Rowan's remarks on head bruises coincide very much with my own experiences, differing, however, in that Dr. Rowan has proof through post mortem examinations, while I merely suspected the trouble. It was many months before I heard of Dr. Rowan's discovery that I first suspected this, while closely watching the birds in the traps with which I was then experimenting for the very purpose of doing away with anything that might unduly frighten or harm them. I kept on experimenting with the Government Sparrow Trap, cutting it up and altering it, and watching the effect of each alteration on the birds, until I finally got the Detachable Funnel Trap (*Canadian Field Naturalist*, September, 1924), still far from the ideal bander's trap I own, and for several reasons. It requires visiting at least every ten minutes or so (I consider no open wire trap should be left longer), and, expecting one of the fatal moments of concussion to be that when the birds make their last bid for freedom on the approach of the operator, I found it also necessary to have a canvas cover ready immediately to slide over the trap and bring the birds to rest.

I cannot agree with Dr. Nelson that an operator is either "careful or conscientious", when working such traps, if he does not "make the rounds of his traps more often than once in two or three hours". That is to say, if he is handling the smaller and more delicate species such as the sparrows. With the larger and coarser birds, barring gallinaceous species, this is not so necessary.

Most of us know that a "wild" bird will, in most cases, if kept in a light wire cage, batter itself to pieces in time but it has seemingly not occurred to many that the fatal blows may be dealt many hours or even days before the bird actually succumbs. Therefore after banding, a lively bird on release may mean a dead bird in a few hours. In Europe some years ago bird-catchers in the "trade" were well aware of this and were careful to guard against it, their living depending on the care they bestowed upon their "catch". The birds there are placed in darkened rooms until quieted and while being "trained", before marketing.

I suggest also that both Dr. Rowan and Dr. Nelson are wrong in suspecting the trouble to lie with the lower parts of the trap, or even with the projecting wires. Dr. Nelson's suggestions of fine wire along the base is a preventative certainly, but I do not find that poking the bill through the wires, while running around the trap, does much harm; for I have "residents" repeating, banded over a year ago, who are continually doing this. I feel convinced that the damage is done by *driving* the bill through the *top* wires when in full flight, as it were, in a high trap, usually at the approach of the operator or when frightened by dogs, cats or hawks. Even a low trap does not entirely check this, but I notice that in a low trap birds are less inclined to try it.

I consider the use of wire traps hardest on birds of any method we employ, although of course they are indispensable to backyard trapping. Again, with these traps, most of our catch unfortunately is of the more delicate species; and equally unfortunate, perhaps, is the fact that such species being so easily caught are handled in immense numbers by all banders, including the least experienced among us; and yet again, the majority of them being seldom recovered, we know not how they fare after their release.

Perhaps, after all, the danger may not lie so much in the methods that we employ, as in *how* these methods are employed. As an instance, Herr J. Schenk of the Royal Hungarian Central Bureau for Ornithology, Budapest, lost but one Lapwing of two hundred taken in snares for banding, which shows what can be done by men skilled in the use of what many might be inclined to call a dangerous method. Nets and snares have always been used by bird-catchers in Europe for the live market, and I see no reason why nets should be frowned on, on this continent. It may be because many years ago, great cruelties being practised in connection with netting, it received a bad name which stuck; but the use of decoys with stitched eyelids, of blinded birds, or, as used with the clap-net, of the "play-bird", whose life was usually but a few claps of the net, are quite unnecessary, and netting is a clean and undoubtedly a valuable, as well as perhaps the only, means known today of securing live birds in quantity—but only when in the hands of a clever and careful worker.

I cannot quite see why experienced ornithologists should not, as suggested by Dr. Grinnell, be instructed in the use of nets by such clever bird-catching artists as Italians, or better still, even the latter themselves be employed in the field under the leadership of the former. Such netting expeditions should prove intensely interesting, and could give nothing but the most valuable results.

As regards types of nets: Foremost in popularity all over the world is the old clap-net, dating back to the days of early Egypt. Yet I should fancy, the scope of this net being somewhat limited, and there being so many methods of using flight and drag nets according to the nature of the country or the habits of the birds, that these latter types would prove the most suitable for our purpose. The clap-net I speak of must not be confused with the mis-named "clap nets" mentioned on page 9 and illustrated in plate II, in the U. S. Department of Agriculture's bulletin entitled "Progress on Cooperative Quail Investigation: 1924". The nets shown in this illustration are hand nets similar to those used by the natives of Chitral, India, for taking quail, and are totally different from the true clap-net, both in shape and manner of use.

These notes are not written with any intention of condemning existing methods, but solely because the writer believes that instead of dismissing lightly a danger such as that brought to our notice by Dr. Rowan, or totally ignoring such suggestions as those of Dr. Grinnell, we should perhaps do better by periodically airing our views and relating our experiences along these lines, thereby assisting in the perfecting of

our methods. Much has been written upon the lighter side of bird banding, and possibly on account of this "picnic" viewpoint many have been persuaded to join in the work. Such remarks therefore as we may make from time to time, if of no other value, may at least prove a means of impressing upon any thoughtless bander the seriousness of the project that he has undertaken. For in all probability, if an investigation were made as suggested by Dr. Rowan, it might be found that the greatest danger of all is the apparently increasing inclination to turn banding into a race game, striving in a childish manner to band more than one's neighbor, or beat some foolish record, in all likelihood at the expense of bird life. To those so inclined, I should like to put the following question: Are we Bird Banding, or merely banding birds?

Cobble Hill, Vancouver Island, B. C., July 20, 1925.

A REPORT ON THE BIRDS OF NORTHWESTERN ALASKA AND REGIONS ADJACENT TO BERING STRAIT. PART VI

WITH FOUR PHOTOS

By ALFRED M. BAILEY

LITTLE BROWN CRANE. *Grus canadensis*.

Cranes were not observed at Wainwright, although the Eskimos claim that a few are usually seen each spring. At Wales they made their first appearance on May 10, when the natives saw a flock offshore, apparently headed for Siberia. Captain Joe Bernard, of the schooner "Teddy Bear", was frozen in about thirty miles below East Cape, and he told me that many flocks of cranes were observed early in May, cutting across Bering Strait to the Siberian shore, where they followed *down* the coast and spread out over the tundra.

I saw several flocks on May 12, regarding which, in my notes, I find the following comment: "The north winds sweep around the corner of the Cape so that there is a lea along the southwest slopes. A heavy fog-belt extended far out over the water, white over the snow-covered ice and black over the open water, with white patches here and there which were ice floes reflecting through. I flushed a flock of about seventy Little Brown Cranes from the mountain side and they straggled off in two V-shaped flocks, protesting in their guttural way until they came to the fog-belt, where they hovered, disconcertedly, calling loudly. Finally, they swung along the spur of the mountain and followed along the highland until they reached the fog-belt reaching from the hills. Then they flew into the fog and I heard them calling as they circled back and forth, soon re-appearing far out at sea. They seemed lost, not knowing where to go. I saw several flocks during the morning and all were bewildered when they reached the fog." A few flocks were seen almost daily the remainder of the month. On May 28, the date when a great number of species seemed to be migrating, I collected three birds on the hillsides, where they were resting. The cranes spread out over the tundra beyond Cape Prince of Wales, a few pairs nesting along Lopp Lagoon. I saw several near Mint River the first week in July but I was unable to discover a nest.