

Several birds have shown a melanistic phase of plumage. In these, both the brown and black feathers are highly colored and show up in distinct contrast, the black predominating. Furthermore, in at least three birds the white throat has been surrounded by a delicate narrow necklace of shiny black feathers. These birds are beautiful to look at. I have not seen this plumage-variation described.

One bird had a yellowish head, and another was noticeably yellow in front of the eyes. This latter bird (A7811) was measured and found to be 5.25 inches in length, the approximate size of small females of this species. It was presumed to be a young-of-the-year. The former bird (No. 141056) was probably also a juvenile, perhaps a bird born in the near by swamp.

These birds are only locally common in these parts. Many observers have never seen one. I never was fortunate enough to see one until last fall. Mr. A. R. Cross, of Huntington, Mass., tells me he has never observed one in his town. Apparently they breed here in Belchertown, as two birds have repeated on the 17th and 20th of May respectively.

On April 2, 1924, I banded a dull-colored, sickly-looking bird and kept it one day for observation. It ate nothing during captivity and died peacefully. It suffered from a light pea-green diarrhoea. On April 21, 1925, I captured another one of the same appearance and with a similar diarrhoea, keeping it one day and releasing it in poor condition. It ate but little during its captivity. One other capture was similarly afflicted, but I did not record whether it was a Swamp Sparrow or a Song Sparrow. The plumage of these afflicted birds was so dull and faded that had I not been experienced in handling Swamp Sparrows I might not have been able to identify them with any certainty.

In the light of this experience, I have been pondering over the controversy between ornithologists as to the recognition to be allowed birds, having slight plumage variations, in our system of nomenclature, even wondering if subspecies had not been in some cases described on the basis of endemics of avian disease.

GOOD AND BAD PRACTICE AT BANDING STATIONS

In the nature of the case, banders operate under very diverse conditions in the matter of environment. At the present time there is also a great difference in the practice pursued at various

stations involving all phases of the work, the actual placing of bands, handling of birds, their study, recording the observations made, etc. Prominent and important variations in practice occur at an early stage of the work, in the kinds of traps used (automatic or non-automatic), and in the extent such traps are tended or kept under observation.

The first and most important fact for banders to keep in mind is that no harm to the birds shall result from trapping and banding them. The use of automatic traps under proper safeguards is approved, but without such safeguards they should not be used. For good reasons, although not the same ones, even drop-door traps should not be operated unless it is realized that bad practice in their use is quite possible.

This Association has long since frowned upon using drop-traps, especially large, heavy ones, as, improperly used, they may be harmful to the birds, and because they permit trapping too many of our small species at once, a practice resulting in unnecessary and prolonged disturbance of the birds owing to the frequent visits required to remove them in the gathering cage. Large takings are to a certain extent due to a kind of rivalry existing among some operators to determine who can trap the most birds at once, a most unwarranted kind of competition. In addition, this type of trap is dangerous since it may injure birds by falling upon them. Drop-door traps (the New England pull-string trap) are not subject to this criticism, although their use in capturing a large number of birds at once is objectionable for the same reason as given above for drop-traps, and the practice likewise leads to lessening the accuracy and value of the observations and notes made, since a large number of trapped birds awaiting liberation naturally induce haste, and haste means poor work.

Large automatic traps are open to the same objections in the matter of large takings, and their proper use should be fully understood and rigorously observed. By this is meant that after nest-building begins their use should be discontinued unless under constant observation or attendance, otherwise sitting birds may be kept too long from their eggs. It does not rest with us to estimate how long birds may be safely kept away from their eggs or young. In Massachusetts and in southern New Hampshire and Vermont their use should be discontinued by May first, and even earlier in Rhode Island and Connecticut. In the rest of our territory, they should be discontinued say by May 10th. Several species of birds normally nest late, and still other kinds may do so occasionally for

one reason or another, so September first appears to be about as early as it is safe to bring out the automatics.

Heaps of old chicken-wire lying in fields or woods, and unused, stored automatic traps under certain conditions, are fruitful causes of bird tragedies, since birds in search of food, particularly insects, find their way inside only to perish of hunger if unable to find their way out. Cases of this kind are reported too frequently. When automatic traps, especially those of the so-called government sparrow-trap type, are not in use all openings large enough for a bird to enter should be carefully sealed.

When in use, automatics of all kinds which permit taking a large number of birds should be frequently and regularly visited in order that too many birds shall not be trapped together, and to forestall attacks from shrikes, hawks, cats, etc. Automatics should seldom be allowed to remain unvisited for more than half an hour.

It does not appear to be desirable to trap more birds than can be suitably studied and banded. We occasionally receive letters from members deploring the fact that few birds are visiting their stations. Such letters usually indicate a misapprehension of the value of the product a banding station should yield. The success of a station is measured, not by the number of birds banded, but by the number of new ornithological facts discovered.

After a bird has entered the gathering-cage (and as a rule only one should be so taken at a time) it should be studied and banded under favorable conditions. It is best to place the cage on a table in a good light where the operator is seated, with notebook and bands conveniently at hand. To avoid errors, the use of poorly opened bands, and to insure speed, Mr. H. S. Shaw has suggested that an advance supply of opened bands be always available, the same to be placed one each in a pay envelope with its number on the outside, such envelopes to be arranged numerically and placed vertically in an open box with half the envelope protruding.

The officers of this association have found it unnecessary to use pliers to adjust bands on the tarsi of small birds. If the band is carefully opened so that the abutting edges remain parallel and the space between be not excessive, the thumb and forefinger will easily bring the ends together again safely and satisfactorily. In the rare cases where it is desirable to remove a band, this can be most conveniently and safely done with a small pair of diagonal cutting pliers, say five inches in length,

the outer ends of the jaws being brought together along the split in the band, the movement of the jaws in the process being *parallel* to the bird's tarsus, thereby bringing no pressure to bear on the tarsus itself.

Regarding the proper way to handle small birds, experience has made evident that to transfer a bird from its position, as grasped by the left hand over the wings in the gathering cage, to a reversed position, by suspending it by the neck, is neither desirable nor necessary. The transfer may be nicely performed in cases of birds seven inches or under in length by making a ring of the fingers of the right hand and sliding them along the neck till they grasp the closed wings. Most birds of a size between a Bluebird and a Flicker may be easily banded in the position in which they are removed from the gathering-cage. There is only one proper manner to hold a bird in removing it from the gathering-cage, and that is by grasping it over the back with the wings closed in their natural position. Do not permit hurry or nervousness to cause any departure from this custom.

C. L. W.

NOTES ON PLUMAGE CHANGES OF MALE AMERICAN GOLDFINCHES

BY CHARLES L. WHITTLE AND HELEN GRANGER WHITTLE

BETWEEN January 16 and May 2, 1924, we banded at our station in Cohasset, Mass., eighty-nine American Goldfinches (*Astragalinus t. tristis*). In addition twenty-four recoveries were made of birds of this species banded at other Cohasset banding stations, nineteen from Mr. Conover Fitch's station and five from that of Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Harding. Many other Goldfinches were studied at short range—five to fifteen feet away—but were not handled.

Of the birds banded, many repeated again and again, sometimes every few days or oftener, thus affording opportunity to note gradual changes in the plumage if such took place. The number of recognized banded male birds studied, adults and juveniles, of which notes were taken, amounted to thirty-two, and to this number should be added eighteen unbanded males studied in and about the traps at short range with binoculars. Occasionally peculiarities of color-distribution permitted the study of the same birds day by day even though they were unbanded.