

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

The first A. O. S. Mid-Winter Meeting was held in Auburn on the week-end of February 21, with field activities confined to the observation of blackbirds. The members began to arrive early on Friday, and by evening our host, THE CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY NATURAL HISTORY CLUB, was on hand to welcome a large group. Following the evening meal, Dr. Maurice F. Baker lectured on the Blackbird Banding Project which he has supervised for two years, and explained the procedure for us to follow on the week-end field trips.

By eight o'clock in the evening we were in caravan formation headed for the blackbird roost to make a drive of birds. Our arrival was timed to give the roosting birds sufficient sleeping time to make them groggy. Only the adventuresome members of the group braved the hazards of darkness and unknown terrain to drive the birds into the trap which housed a battery of lamps of 5,000 watts. It was an eerie atmosphere as we silently stumbled along in the unknown darkness, listening to the creaking gurgles and the mechanical squeaks emitted by the unsuspecting birds. With the whine of the big generator, the blinding light came on and with much whistling, clapping of hands, and beating of the reeds, the frightened birds were driven toward the lights in the tent which would trap them and hold them for the observations and banding of the next day.

Saturday dawned a clear cool day. We had enough birds trapped for a full morning of banding. As we approached the tent we heard noises sounding like those from a chicken house, with much squeaking, clucking, and whirring of wings. The receiving cages were placed in a long row at one corner of the tent where the birds could filter-out from the tent into the cages and be held while banding proceeded. It was interesting to hold starlings, grackles, cowbirds, rustys, and red-wings in the hand and study them at close range. Each species was beautiful in its own black cloak. An iridescent spectrum of colors was produced as the sunlight struck and reflected from the black feathers. The cowbird was so patient that once placed on her back, she would lie patiently; she could even be laid on her back on the work table and one could continue to move about her for several minutes before she would realize that she was free to turn over and fly away. At the end of the morning we had seen about five hundred birds banded and released.

After lunch and the business meetings were concluded, we were free to take to the field. This time we were going to watch the return of the blackbirds to their roost. Oliver L. Austin in his BIRDS OF THE WORLD, noted, "The birds leave the roosts at dawn and travel as much as 30 to 50 miles in search of good foraging. By mid-afternoon they start heading toward the roost, and converge on it from all directions. The vanguard arrives several hours before dark and from then on flock after flock pour in until darkness."

The birds started coming to their roost, as the brilliant, late winter sun began to sink into the grey western sky. The roost was a bamboo experimental area in a small valley, north of Auburn. Dr. Baker had estimated that one-half million birds were using this roost at the peak of their roosting season. The orderly flight lines began to appear.

Some came from the East, some from the West, but always in formation and always increasing in numbers. Only when the lines were closest to the ground could one hear the whisper of the many wings and the occasional cluck of the grackle as he winged his way to rest in the surrounding trees. The silent leafless trees suddenly came to life with birds perching among the branches. The slightest movement of the birds gave the impression of the trees in full leaf swaying in a gentle breeze. When it was time for the birds to drop into the canes for their nightly positions the trees looked as though their leaves were falling slowly and systematically to the ground.

The voices from the reeds and the colors of the sky held us fascinated as darkness approached. The colors in the sky began to change almost as rapidly as those in a kaleidoscope. At first the sky to the east was a light blue and to the west a light green. Then in the east the blue added a tinge of pink and the green of the west a tinge of yellow. Over head the puffy clouds were a brilliant pink with hundreds of lines of blackbirds continuing to stream in from each direction. The voices of birds perched in the reeds developed to a din of songs and call notes. As the brilliance of the late afternoon heightened, so did the chorus of voices joined by other companions, the Cardinal, the Brown Thrasher, and the White-throated Sparrow. This crescendo continued to grow louder and louder as the sky burst into flame. Every branch of tree and bush became alive with thousands of blackbirds. There was a gentle roar of the masses of wings of the one-half million birds, swiftly coming from all directions and "pitching-in" to the roost.

Something hushed one part of the orchestra. The flaming red sky slowly turned to orange. Two stars, Venus and Jupiter, shone brightly in the western sky as the thousands of arriving blackbirds trickled to a few hundred stragglers. The Great Blue Heron came to perch in his usual tall pine tree and the din of voices softened until the voices of frogs could be distinguished above the call of the red-wings. The twilight had changed into night. The chilly air was heavy with the odor of feathers and uric acid. The voices remained loud and clear. The spring peepers provided the background music, the chorus frogs adding harmony, interspersed by the "who who" of the Great Horned Owl. Intermittently a blackbird would squeak or chirp as he was pushed from his perch by a companion.

Everything became a silhouette, just as the activities of A.O.S. for the past year have become history. The sky which at last has turned to grey, studded with brilliant stars, is like our A.O.S. membership, studded with potentialities for the coming year. The remaining glow of orange on the evening horizon must change to the new dawn for A.O.S. as potential activities are to develop into realities. Begin the new year by attending the Spring Meeting on Dauphin Island, April 24-26 with reservations at Holiday House Apartments, Mrs. Carolyn Hager, Manager.

Rosemary T. Dusi