

BANDER'S CORNER

James V. Peavy, Jr.

One of the great rewards of being a bird bander is the opportunity to be out of doors in wild and sometimes lonely places for an entire day. When you have bird nets up, you are forced to remain nearby, and as a result, you can become very familiar with an area. These conditions lend to experiences that do not always relate to birds, but which are interesting and enjoyable encounters with other forms of wildlife. Following are a few experiences I have had while banding.

Spring, 1973 - Ted Weems and I had been banding for eight days on the Gulf Coast. One of our favorite places is St. Andrew's Bay, near the abandoned town of Navy Cove. Nearby we found a pond with a brood of baby alligators, watched over by a very protective mother. One day a Pied-billed Grebe stopped on the pond to rest and feed. Soon the mother alligator was stalking the grebe. She swam slowly toward the bird, showing nothing but her eyes and nostrils, until only ten yards of water separated the two. Without a ripple, the alligator sank out of sight. Both Ted and I expected to see the grebe disappear in a sudden splash of snapping jaws, but that grebe must have seen alligators before. As soon as the gator was submerged, the grebe also sank; for a few long seconds, the pond was calm, ruffled only by a slight breeze. Soon the alligator reappeared, and so did the grebe; they had changed places! This same performance occurred again and again during the day. The next morning the grebe was gone - eaten? I'll bet not.

Fall, 1973 - Ted and I were again at St. Andrew's Bay. As usual we were camping out, sleeping in my V-W van; suddenly there were footsteps outside. Not just one or two, but an army marching by, and I ask, "Ted, do you hear that?..." Silly question...even Weems couldn't sleep through that racket. So we investigate - nothing. As soon as we turn on the light, open the door and look around, all is quiet; as soon as we settle down again, the army is on the move. Finally we sat outside, quietly waiting. Soon our visitor was identified - an armadillo, and only one at that.

For banders there is a special thrill in getting to band a new species; the opportunity to hold, examine, measure and record data on a new bird is one of the high points in a bander's day. For most birders, some species are especially interesting and exciting; for example, waterfowl, warblers and birds of prey. You can imagine what a thrill it must have been for Margaret Miller this fall when she caught and banded a Sharp-shinned Hawk, a new species for her and one of the really exciting birds to handle.

When a bird wearing a band is recovered, the person who banded the bird receives a computer card with number-coded information. These numbers are translated with the aid of the bird banding manual, and sometimes an interesting story unfolds. One such card arrived this fall, and it stated 44-22-04-01-300-01-4, among other things. These numbers told me that this bird, a male Brown-headed Cowbird, was captured by a state employee working on the Cowbird Control Program in the very heart of the Kirtland's Warbler breeding range. This Cowbird was banded in the Birmingham Zoo on January 26, 1974, and was trapped near Luzerne, Michigan, on June 1 of the same year. For those not familiar with the Kirtland's Warbler story, a little background information follows.

The Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest songbirds in the United States. It has a very restricted breeding range and a highly specialized nesting

habitat requirement, nesting only in young jack-pines in a few counties of North Central Michigan. For some reason the Brown-headed Cowbird, which is a brood-parasite, seeks out the Kirtland's nest in which to lay its eggs. The developing Cowbird usually gets so much of the available food that the warbler young do not survive. Although Cowbirds lay eggs in the nests of other species, the Kirtland's nests are among the most heavily parasitized. The species is already in trouble due to low numbers, so every nest is important to its ultimate survival. Local authorities began a control program several years ago in which large numbers of Cowbirds are trapped and killed. This program is apparently working, because fewer Kirtland's nests seem to be parasitized since the program began. We become involved with this species, because the very Cowbirds which visit our fields and feeders all winter may be one of the parties involved in a life-and-death struggle for the survival of an entire species.

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BIRMINGHAM TOWER CASUALTIES

Fall, 1974

Richard J. Remy, Jr.

Fall collections were made of bird casualties at WAPI and WBRG television towers in Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama. The location and structure of the towers are described in Alabama Birdlife 16:4 (34) and 17:2 (46).

During the collection period which began on September 9 and ended on November 10, daily trips were made to the towers between sunrise and 8:30 a.m. During this period, 29 individuals of 14 species were collected. The following table shows the number of specimens collected at each tower and the dates of collection.

It may be of interest to note that the majority of the casualties were recovered after overcast, rainy nights with northeasterly winds.

To my knowledge, the only systematic tower kill surveys in Birmingham were performed by Michael Lee Bierly in 1967 and 1968. It is my intention to reinstate regular, systematic surveys of tower casualties during the fall and spring migration periods for the purpose of collecting data for records of migration movements, academic study of specimens and other related endeavors.

The specimens will be donated to approved museums and universities for use as study skins.

Special thanks to James V. Peavy, Jr., for his help in conducting this survey.

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Greg D. Jackson

		<u>Total at Each Tower</u>	
		<u>WAPI</u>	<u>WBRC</u>
9/9	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Swainson's Thrush		
9/15	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Eastern Phoebe, Black-burnian Warbler		
9/16	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: American Redstart		
9/19	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Swainson's Thrush		
9/20	- WBRC: Red-eyed Vireo WAPI: 0		
9/24	- WBRC: Yellow-breasted Chat WAPI: 0		
9/25	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Red-eyed Vireo*, Yellow-breasted Chat		
9/26	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Gray Catbird, Wood Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, 2 Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow-breasted Chat, Rose-breasted Grosbeak		
9/29	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Swainson's Thrush		
10/2	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Red-eyed Vireo		
10/8	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Gray Catbird		
10/16	- WBRC: American Coot, 3 Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak WAPI: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Pine Warbler		
10/30	- WBRC: 0 WAPI: Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet		
		American Coot	0
		Yellow-billed Cuckoo	2
		Eastern Phoebe	1
		Gray Catbird	2
		Wood Thrush	1
		Hermit Thrush	1
		Swainson's Thrush	4
		Ruby-crowned Kinglet	1
		Red-eyed Vireo	4
		Blackburnian Warbler	1
		Pine Warbler	1
		Yellow-breasted Chat	2
		American Redstart	1
		Rose-breasted Grosbeak	1
			22
			7
		Combined Total: 29	

In the gloomy pre-dawn hours of November 10, 1974, one could see a sinister-looking caravan moving swiftly north on the Dauphin Island Causeway. The destination of the vehicles was the still-slumbering town of Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Even though the occupants of these cars were not hostile, they were heavily armed - with boxes of Dramamine, heavy coats, well-used binoculars and field guides. This was the day that 21 hardy and enthusiastic birders braved the waters of the Gulf of Mexico in search of pelagic birds. These courageous souls were: Dick and Judy Crittenden, Temple Douglas, Howard Einspahr, Reid Freeman, Billie Sue and Donald Hulsey, Tom Imhof, Greg Jackson, Helen Kittinger, Roger Naner, Ann Miller, David Patick, James and Lee Peavy, Bob and Elberta Reid, Percy Thigpen, Arthur and Becky Tyson and Harriett Wright.

At 6:00 a.m. the party boarded their vessel, the R.V. Aquarius. The boat was the property of the Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium, and the able man at the helm was Capt. Barton Kern. The Aquarius headed down the bayou under clear and sunny skies. The temperature that day ranged from 40°F early in the morning to 60°F in the afternoon, and the wind was from the southeast at 10 to 20 knots. Some of the birds observed during the 10-minute journey down the bayou included: Great Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Louisiana Heron, Wood Duck, Clapper Rail, Belted Kingfisher, Common Flicker, Fish Crow, Carolina Wren, Starling, House Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, Savannah Sparrow and White-throated Sparrow.

As the group traversed the placid waters of Mississippi Sound, all eyes were trained upon the sea. Although coastal species were common, there were no pelagics to be seen. But, something that was seen (and especially felt) was the increase in size of the swells in the gulf as the boat passed the west end of Dauphin Island. Though the swells were not especially large (about five feet), they were rough enough to force most of the shrimp boats to work in the sound. The boat continued southeast until eventually it was 14 miles from shore. After many hours without sighting any pelagic species, the attitudes of some observers were getting more and more pessimistic, but they stayed alert (at least usually).

One of the reasons for this slight deterioration in attitude was that always-faithful companion of novice seagoers - seasickness. The gulf was not the only thing green that day. Trips to the rail (for purposes not directly affiliated with watching birds) were about as frequent as the sightings of Laughing Gulls and were equally difficult to estimate. About half of the people were ill at some time, and many of the other half came close. Remarks such as: "I wish they'd pull off to the side for just a minute or two so we could stop moving;" and "I don't know if I could look up for a flock of Whooping Cranes," were prevalent among certain passengers. It became increasingly difficult for some birders to look for pelagic birds while lying and kneeling near the rail and staring blankly into the sea. There was, however, a general consensus among the non- or partially-affected birders that the other passengers did not miss much while they were sick, for no unusual birds were sighted on the open sea.

The Aquarius traveled south of Sand Island (which was inundated) and then headed into Mobile Bay between Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan. At this point, a miracle happened - the great swells turned into ripples. This life-saving condition almost immediately picked up the spirits of the formerly seasick passengers. Though the seasickness problem was solved, one pressing problem remained - there were still

*This bird was found stunned and was unable to fly. Both its vision and coordination had been impaired by its apparent collision with a tower support cable. It was taken to the Birmingham Zoo where it proved to be a cooperative patient for five days. By then, it had sufficiently recovered and was released.