

Bird Casualties At Smyrna And Nashville Ceilometers, 1955

by AMELIA R. LASKEY

On the night of September 24-25, 1955, more than 1400 birds of 51 species were killed or injured as Sewart Air Force Base, Smyrna, and a few at Berry Field, Nashville.

After a week of warm weather with temperatures reaching 90 to 97 degrees, there was a sudden change on September 24. Rain and northerly winds prevailed, with temperatures for that day ranging from 73 to 68 degrees. When rainfall ceased in the afternoon, the cloud ceiling was only 500 feet.

From my previous experiences, it seemed very probable that there would be a concentration of migrating birds at ceilometers, so I went to the Nashville airport. At 9:45 p. m. there were hundreds fluttering rather high in the beam. There was much noise made by a concentration of delayed arriving and departing planes, which seemed to keep the birds from the lower level. The cloud ceiling had risen to 2300-3000 feet after dark. At 10:45 p. m. one of the American Airlines employees helped me to gather about a dozen birds from the runway. When shown these, the Weather Bureau immediately turned off the ceilometer beam temporarily to allow the birds to disperse.

It was not feasible so late at night to go to Sewart Air Force Base at Smyrna, about 10 miles south-east of Berry Field. I phoned the Weather Bureau there at 11:30 p. m., knowing that their ceilometer is equipped with a "hood" or screen so that they can operate on the invisible ultra-violet beam, thus eliminating all visible light. The man at the phone investigated, said the birds were in the beam, and that they would use the hood.

The following morning, I went to Berry Field first, collecting a few additional birds, only 35 in all. Then I went on to Sewart Air Force Base. The destruction there was appalling. The Weather Bureau men had been unable to operate the hood, probably due to lack of experience; it had been used successfully on previous occasions. Three heavy sacks contained the birds gathered from the runways, and in addition a large area near the ceilometer, on driveways, and among the foundations and excavations of buildings under construction, contained both living and dead birds. A lieutenant helped me gather as many as possible.

As on previous disaster occasions, I sent a report and suggestions to Frederick C. Lincoln, Assistant to the Director of Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D. C. He took up the matter with the Pentagon and the Weather Bureau with gratifying results.

Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay recently issued a newspaper release that Air Force Bases east of the Mississippi have orders to use the screen during September and October and whenever necessary to protect migrating birds. Commercial ceilometers are to be equipped with these screens. At Nashville, the screen has been installed at Berry Field. It operates satisfactorily and eliminates all visible light from the beam.

Although it was not possible to catch many of the numerous injured birds hopping about the Smyrna ceilometer, four survived to be banded and released: Olive-backed Thrush, 2; Tennessee Warbler, 1; Rose-breasted Grosbeak, 1.

As there were no different species at Nashville, the 35 collected there were not kept separated from the Smyrna group. In the latter group, 35 individuals were mashed too badly by vehicles for identification. The outstanding find was a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, the first specimen for Tennessee (See Round Table note in this issue). Species with the highest count of casualties were, Tennessee Warbler, 206; Ovenbird, 187; Magnolia Warbler, 157; Olive-backed Thrush, 139; Northern Yellow-throat, 100. The three species heading this list also led in numbers of casualties at the Nashville ceilometer in October 1951 and October 1954 (MIGRANT 22:60 and MIGRANT 25:68). The list of casualties for 1955 follows: Pied-billed Grebe, 2; Virginia Rail, 1; Sora Rail, 11; Mourning Dove, 1; Nighthawk, 1; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, 4; Acadian Flycatcher, 2; Alder Flycatcher, 3; Wood Pewee, 5; Long-billed Marsh Wren, 1; Catbird, 77; Wood Thrush, 9; Olive-backed Thrush, 139; Gray-cheeked Thrush, 58; Willow Veery, 4; White-eyed Vireo, 7; Yellow-throated Vireo, 16; Red-eyed Vireo, 74; Philadelphia Vireo, 25; Black and White Warbler, 44; Worm-eating Warbler, 1; Blue-winged Warbler, 1; Tennessee Warbler, 206; Nashville Warbler, 3; Magnolia Warbler, 157; Black-throated Blue Warbler, 1; Myrtle Warbler, 1; Black-throated Green Warbler, 23; Blackburnian Warbler, 5; Yellow-throated Warbler, 2; Chestnut-sided Warbler, 33; Bay-breasted Warbler, 12; Prairie Warbler, 2; Palm Warbler, 12; Ovenbird, 187; Northern Water-thrush, 18; Kentucky Warbler, 5; Mourning Warbler, 3; Northern Yellow-throat, 100; Yellow-breasted Chat, 4; Wilson's Warbler, 1; Canada Warbler, 5; Redstart, 55; Bobolink, 4; Scarlet Tanager, 10; Summer Tanager, 9; Rose-breasted Grosbeak, 3; Indigo Bunting, 15; Dickcissel, 3; Grasshopper Sparrow, 1; Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, 1.

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1955 Fall Migration Of Hawks

By THOMAS W. FINUCANE

Last fall the T. O. S. undertook its sixth consecutive study of the migration of hawks across our state. The total count was about 700, including 532 Broad-winged Hawks. This is the smallest total so far obtained.

The weather had a depressing effect on the count. Starting Sept. 24 there were general rains and cloudiness in eastern Tennessee for the remainder of the month. The last two weeks of September usually provide the bulk of our records for Broad Wings, but this year the absence of observers in the field Sept. 19 through 22, followed by inclement weather, can explain our failure to record this species in larger numbers.

The Chilhowee, Unicoi and Little Frog Mountains were investigated during the last week of September and discovered, in spite of the discouraging weather, that this system of ridges northwest of the Great Smokies is part of the migration route for Broad Wings and other hawks.

The accompanying chart gives dates, observers, localities, hours of observation, wind direction and velocity, temperature, weather conditions and the count of all hawks reported.

After the discovery that a particular location is on a route taken by Broad Wings in their flight southward it is still to be learned whether the location witnesses the passage of this species in substantial numbers every autumn, most autumns, or only once or twice in a decade. It would be interesting to have a record of the total number of hawks observed from this location during the last half of September over a period of years and how this number varies from year to year, from day to day, and from hour to hour.