



The Redstart

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OBSERVATIONS OF SKY-DANCING WOODCOCKS
by
George F. Flouer

After observing the "sky dance" of the Woodcock, Philohela minor, at Oglebay Park, West Virginia, for several years, it was, indeed, a great pleasure for me to hear the familiar "buzz" of this interesting bird at Lost River State Park, near Moorefield, Hardy County, West Virginia. I first heard it there on the evening of March 5, 1938. During the next two weeks, I heard and saw the sky-dancing Woodcock on twelve evenings and made a number of observations which seemed to me to be of general interest.

As was the case with observations made at Oglebay Park, the sky-dancing period seemed to extend for about two weeks, in this case, March 5 to 19, inclusive.

The nest has been sought, in vain, at Oglebay Park in the brushy hillside from which the Woodcock rise for their sky-dancing and to which they return. There, it seems, we were on the wrong track. To quote Rex Brasher in "Birds of America;"- "The bird may be found nesting well up on the hills even though there is a favorite resort not far away to which it travels in the evening and forages for its nocturnal supper." This seems to check with what I observed on several evenings when I visited the "Woodcock Knoll" at Lost River Park earlier than usual.

On these occasions, I heard no calling by the birds until after I had seen one, or more, arrive at the "dancing ground" from the direction of a deep hollow. These arrivals flew straight for the knoll, without zig-zagging or fluttering, and alighted there. Finally, as it became darker, a few "buzzes" would be heard and then, with whistling wings, up a bird would go.

All birds which I observed left the ground and angled, rather than spiraled, into the air. Up, up, up they would go and, at the crest of its rise, each described a large circle overhead. As each bird neared the approximate point in the air where the circle had begun, it described, in the air, a fairly well-defined figure eight, the start of a fluttering, erratic descent to the earth.

Several times birds alighted very near to where I stood. At one time, one alighted some eight yards distant. On another occasion, one bird alighted and walked to within two feet of my station behind a tree. It was fairly dark, at this time, and the bird appeared to mind not at all when I turned the beam of a flashlight upon it. Instead, it strutted in the spotlight like a miniature turkey gobbler. In this instance, I was fortunate to observe the bird's mannerisms at close range. Immediately before each "buzz" it emitted a deep, throaty sound and sometimes would make this sound without following it by the "buzz." A slight drooping of the wings accompanied each utterance of the preliminary, low sound, but with each "buzz," the head and body would jerk sharply, and the bill, pointing upward, would open widely and emit the "buzzing" note. The latter sound recalls to me the sound made by the Nighthawk, Chordeiles virginianus.

"Sky-dances" timed by me, from the time a bird left the ground until its return, averaged about one minute and five seconds. On March 6, the first flight was made at about 6:15 p.m. and on March 19, the first flight occurred at 6:45 p.m. This seems to indicate that, as twilight gradually arrived later each evening, the birds waited for a certain degree of darkness before performing their courtship flights.

Lost River State Park
Mathias, West Virginia.

CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUS

Members of The Brooks Bird Club will conduct their annual Christmas bird census on Monday, December 26, 1938, according to a decision by the Active Membership at its November meeting.

Those expecting to participate in the event are to meet at the general offices, Oglebay Park, Wheeling, at 10 a.m. on December 26. There they will be divided into small groups for the census taking. The Park area of 750 acres will be censused for the sixth year in succession, and it is possible, also, that a part of the group will conduct the second annual census of the Bird Hill area in Marshall county.

Guests of club members and any other non-members interested are invited to take part in the census.

--- J.W.H.

FIELD NOTES

Hérons in Putnam and Wood Counties, W.Va.:- Between the towns of Poca and Nitro, Putnam County, West Virginia, several ponds of water lie between the Great Kanawha River and W.Va. State Route 35. The area covered by these ponds now is about two and one-half acres and were formed upon the completion of the Winfield Dam in the Kanawha River. The ponds are comparatively new and typical aquatic vegetation is sparse, but there are evidences that it is taking hold, such as the appearance of small patches of cat-tail and other water plants. Small fish and frogs are present in considerable numbers.

In the course of a visit to these ponds on August 7, 1938, I recorded the Great Blue Heron, Ardea herodias, the American Egret, Casmerodius albus egretta, and the Green Heron, Butorides virescens. One Egret was noted flying above the ponds, another was observed feeding, four Great Blue Herons were observed feeding and fully 50 Green Herons were in the immediate neighborhood, flying, feeding or resting.

The feeding Egret was first noted on a down-log a few feet from shore in the larger pond. It caught its prey from this and other logs in the immediate vicinity while I watched, never wading in the water during my observations, in contrast to the Great Blues, all of which fished while standing in the water. The Egret walked cautiously along the logs, neck outstretched, sometimes pausing with one foot raised. It caught small fish with typical, heron-like darts of its beak and head below the surface of the water. With each catch it poised a moment, beak pointed skyward, the wriggling prey between the stout mandibles. The fish were turned with a few movements of the mandibles and the prey disappeared down the bird's throat in a single gulp, to the accompaniment of the usual, grotesque convulsion of the Egret's long neck.

The Great Blues moved as gracefully and silently as the Egret, though they waded in the water itself. Their fishing was, however, fully as successful as was the Egret's. Green Herons appeared to be everywhere, their characteristic squawking notes being heard as they flew above the ponds. Looking toward the ponds one could see individuals perched on snags, in trees nearby, standing motionless along the shores or in the shallow water.

On October 2, 1938, a party of us returning to Charleston by automobile from the annual Nature School Reunion at Oglebay Park observed a single Great Blue Heron along Bull's Run, in Wood County, West Virginia, a quarter-mile north of Waverly. The bird first was noted by Miss Gladys Murray. Others in the party were Margaret Wehrle, Sarah Barber, Lucy Barber, Marjoretta Stahl and myself.

--- Clyde B. Upton
Charleston, W. Va.

Waterbirds in Morgan County, West Virginia:- Following are a few notes which may be added to those made by J. Lloyd Poland in his "Preliminary List of the Birds of the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia," which appeared in the July-August issue of The Redstart (Vol. V, Nos. 10-11, pp. 64-75, July-Aug., 1938).

The birds listed here were seen by the writer on the six-acre lake at the foot of Great Cacapon Mountain, in Cacapon State Park, Morgan County, West Virginia, on the dates indicated in March and April, 1938.

Hoelboell's Grebe. Colymbus griengena hoelboelli. Only one individual of this species was seen. It remained on the lake all day, affording ample opportunity to observe it from a rowboat on numerous occasions on March 26.

Scaup Duck. Nyroca sp. (?) Eleven females and 29 males were seen on April 8. Three pair, seen on March 26, I believe to have been examples of the Greater Scaup, N. marila, because, at close range, the white-appearing side-patches seemed more prominent than those of the Lesser Scaup, N. affinis.

Bufflehead. Charitonetta albeola. Two males and two females were noted on March 26.

Hooded Merganser. Lophodytes cucullatus. Two males and a female were observed on April 6.

(Editor's Note: Hoelboell's Grebe does not appear in Mr. Poland's Eastern Panhandle list to which reference is made above. The three other species are not listed for Morgan County by Mr. Poland - J.W.H.)

--- George Flouer
Lost River State Park
Mathias, W.Va.

Chimney Swifts Nesting on Spruce Knob, W.Va. Some of us had gone to see the sunrise on the morning of August 6, 1938, from Spruce Knob, in Pendleton County, West Virginia, highest elevation in the State. At the highest point, 4,860 feet above sea level, stands a low, wooden tower. When daylight had come, we noticed that Chimney Swifts, Chaetura pelagica, circled in the air above the tower. Occasionally, they wheeled close to the structure and each time that this was done young birds, within the tower, set up a hunger cry. Later, we observed Swifts entering and leaving the tower where young were being fed. It was interesting to note that the "highest up" bird nest in the Mountain State was that of the Chimney Swift. Likewise, it was interesting to know that these birds nest elsewhere than within the chimneys of dwellings of other buildings.

--- I.B. Boggs
W.Va. University
Morgantown, W.Va.

The Blue Jay at Oglebay Park:- Mrs. Handlan and I heard and saw a Blue Jay, Cyanocitta cristata, at Oglebay Park, October 10, 1938. Since that date and including, at least, November 26, examples of this species have been recorded in the Park, although apparently no more than two individuals have been noted at the same time. So far as I am aware, the October 10 observation is the fourth, only, for this species at the Park in the past 10 years. Mr. A. B. Brooks observed a Blue Jay in early spring on one occasion, and all other records have been in Autumn.

The species is of such rare occurrence in the Park and in the territory immediately adjacent to it that the note seems worthy of record. Mr. Henry Armstrong and other employes of the Park who for years were employed on the property when it was known as Waddington Farm, have informed me that "jay birds" were common here about 20 years ago. Their descriptions of these "jay birds" unmistakably fit the Blue Jay. In that 20 years little change has occurred in land use in this section and such changes as have occurred would appear to favor bird life, in general, rather than to militate against it.

--- J. W. Handlan
Wheeling, W. Va.

Observations of a Crow Flight:- On October 29, 1938, I spent the afternoon hunting squirrels near the Rocky Fork Road, about twelve miles from Charleston, W. Va. In this section there are several woods of considerable extent. Late in the afternoon I found myself near the top of a steep hill, along a rail fence which separated a corn field, on one slope, from the woods which reached steeply down toward a small stream at the foot of the other slope. Crows had been steadily flying overhead for some time when it occurred to me to attempt a partial count of their number. During a 15-minute interval between 4:15 and 4:30 o'clock p.m. I counted 907 Crows, Corvus brachyrhynchos, as they passed overhead. I had been in this place about 45 minutes and, I believe, Crows had been flying above me during the entire time. If the same average was maintained as during my 15-minute count, some 2,700 birds must have been included in the flight.

--- Clyde B. Upton
Charleston, W. Va.

Short-billed Marsh Wren in Randolph County, W. Va.:- On July 17, 1938, Ruth Brooks, I. B. Boggs, A. S. Margolin and the writer visited the high mountain territory along the Randolph-Pendleton county border. Where the forest road crosses Gandy Creek in Randolph County, just below the Gatewood Fire Tower, is a small, swampy place surrounded by Red Spruces. In this swamp we found at least two pairs (probably more) of Short-billed Marsh Wrens, Cistothorus stellaris, the males in full song and the birds giving every evidence of breeding nearby. Search failed to reveal a nest, however.

It seemed especially interesting to find these birds in a mountain situation, with such associates as Hermit and Olive-backed Thrushes, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Winter Wrens. I recall that E. A. Brooks told me, some years ago, of having heard four species of wrens, Bewick's, Carolina, House and Winter, singing at one time near the Sinks of Gandy Creek, at Oceola. It now seems that a fifth species might be added to the chorus.

--- Maurice Brooks
W.Va. University
Morgantown, W.Va.

White-eyed Vireo near Elm Grove, W.Va.:— I was walking up Stone Church Hill, near Elm Grove, Ohio County, West Virginia, on July 31, 1938, when I heard the song of a White-eyed Vireo, Vireo griseus. The song came from a dense thicket of young trees, completely overgrown by blackberry bushes, and I found it very difficult to break my way to where I supposed the singer to be. After a five-minute search, I discovered a White-eyed Vireo moving about in the top of a small apple tree, singing its characteristic song. A few minutes later a second White-eyed Vireo was found moving among the lower branches of nearby trees. I watched both birds and listened to the song for more than an hour. This was the first time I had found this species in Ohio County. Mr. Tom E. Shields reports the White-eyed Vireo as a Summer resident of nearby Marshall County.

--- Harold Olsen
Elm Grove
Wheeling, W. Va.

The Lark Sparrow at Oglebay Park?:— A bird tentatively identified as a Lark Sparrow, Chondestes gramacus, was observed on October 12, 1938, at Oglebay Park. This note is not written to add a "new bird" to the Park list but to suggest to observers possibilities in that direction. On the date mentioned, and as I was walking from the general office at Oglebay Park, Ohio County, W.Va., I was halted by the sound of a bird song entirely new to me. It recalled the song of a Goldfinch, in part, with the addition of other sparrow-like notes. In a few moments I noted the singer, partly concealed in shrubbery close to where I stood but some eight feet above me at the edge of an automobile parking ground. I noted a single dark spot on a light-colored breast. The bird sang twice more, while I watched it and then flew to the ground along the top of the wall and beyond my sight.

I reached the parking ground and crouched in the shrubbery near where the bird first had been seen perched. For several minutes it continued singing and I timed the songs as best I could with an ordinary watch. In twelve time-records, I noted that one song was as long as 12 seconds, one as short as five and the others approximately eight seconds in duration, each. During this time the bird

was out of my sight in heavy shrubbery, but presently began to move toward me. I got brief glimpses of it until it moved into a small open space which I afterward found was just three paces from where I stood. It flew at once, but in the brief glance I was permitted I was conscious of broad striping and rich chestnut color about the head. I failed to note white in the tail of the bird. The single breast mark was conspicuous.

This slender evidence is too fragile upon which to rest a claim to a new park record, particularly as this observer never had seen or heard a Lark Sparrow. It would seem to warrant observers closely examining Sparrows noted in the Park in the Fall, with the hope that this species might be added to the Park list.

--- J.W. Handlan
Wheeling, W.Va.

EDITORIAL

Greetings of the Season!:- Active Members of The Brooks Bird Club join the editor of THE REDSTART in extending to all other Members their very best wishes for a merry Christmas and happy New Year. They extend to all interested in this organization a very cordial invitation to visit the club's headquarters at Oglebay Park, Wheeling, and to participate in any and all activities of the active membership. Plans are being carried forward by the Active Members for a number of field trips of particular interest, of which details will be announced in THE REDSTART from time to time, and in which all our friends are invited to join. The pages of this journal, of course, remain always open to the notes and observations of the entire membership.

Announcing an Editorial Policy:- Geographical races of various species of North American birds are officially accepted only after certain technical formalities have been observed. Under ordinary circumstances, long series of specimens are examined and compared. Field data are compiled and carefully examined. Often enough the validity of a recognized sub-species rests upon very narrow ground.

Ranges of certain of these races are reasonably well defined. Observers of free, wild birds in the field may, in given areas, report this sub-species, or that one, with the probability that such racial identifications are correct. To be entirely upon the safe side, specific identifications should be indicated in any written record of a field observation, without reference to the probable race involved. The most accurate way, and the simplest way, in which this may be done is to use the technical binomial following the common name.

In certain cases, indeed, the technical binomial is virtually necessary. It is unfortunately true that various vernacular names themselves indicate racial distinction. For example, the name "Palm Warbler," applies, correctly, only to the Western race of Dendroica palmarum --- D. p. palmarum. The term "Northern Water-thrush" applies, correctly, only to the Eastern race of Seiurus noveboracensis --- S. n. noveboracensis. Under good conditions for observation, the races of Dendroica palmarum are said not to be difficult to distinguish in the field, so far as that example goes, but what bold observer is going to report with assurance the presence of "Northern Water-thrush," or "Grinnell's Water-thrush?"

Specific identification is, in some cases, quite enough problem for the amateur observer, as witness the example of the Scaup ducks. In the matter of sub-specific identification, it seems to The Editor that racial distinctions had best be left to the taxonomists and that amateur field naturalists need not concern themselves with distinctions of race.

Under ordinary conditions, then, notes reproduced in THE REDSTART will concern themselves with species, only, and not with sub-species, in cases of sight identifications. This journal will, of course, print notes in which circumstances of observation are cited as evidence for the observers' belief that birds under discussion belong to one race or another. As nearly as possible, however, vernacular names will be confined to those in which the specific, rather than racial, identification is expressed or implied. Technical names will be confined to the binomial, as a general rule.

This will not apply to identifications of specimens by competent authority, although the source of such racial identifications as may be given must be included in this case.

This general, editorial policy has been decided upon by unanimous action of the Active Members of The Brooks Bird Club present at their regular November meeting, 1938. Future contributors will confer a favor upon the editor and those who assist him by omitting qualifying words such as "Eastern," "Northern," etc., from common names of birds reported and confining technical terminology to the specific binomial. Exceptions are suggested above.

--- J. W. Handlan

THE REDSTART is sent free to all members of The Brooks Bird Club. This includes Honorary Members (who pay no dues); Active Members (who pay annual dues of \$1.00 each and are elected to Active Membership); and Corresponding Members (who pay annual dues of 50 cents each and become members upon application). This issue was edited by J.W.Handlan, Oglebay Park, Wheeling, W. Va.