



The Redstart

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THE EASTERN PANHANDLE INVITES ORNITHOLOGISTS

by
J. Lloyd Poland

It can be said, truly enough, that no part of West Virginia has been "over-worked" by ornithologists, but it seems to me that the Eastern Panhandle has received less than its share of the attention of West Virginia nature study forays of the past. If this lack of attention to an area which, to my mind at least, offers splendid bird study possibilities is based on lack of acquaintance with the region, it can be excused. However, as one born and bred in that area and still calling it "home" it becomes my manifest, patriotic duty to do my bit to acquaint bird students with the Eastern Panhandle!

In the State's three most eastern counties, it can be said that three life zones are represented: Canadian, in the Cacapon mountain region of Morgan County; Transition, in most of Morgan and parts of Berkeley County; and Upper Austral in sections of Berkeley and Jefferson Counties. Regardless of the present acceptance of the life zone theory, the area under discussion offers a number of different habitats and plant associations, each harboring a different fauna.

First and most important of these habitats and offered here as "chief inducement" to visiting bird students is one which has been artificially created. I refer to the series of ponds created by the development of the Federal fish hatchery at Leetown, Jefferson County. The institution has been established long enough to have permitted establishment of an aquatic habitat which closely approaches a natural one. The people in charge at the hatchery are friendly and cooperative and have helped make possible considerable investigation of the bird life there by a few observers.

A definite group of aquatic forms of birds, in limited numbers breed within and about the hatchery boundaries. Nests of Mallards and Pied-billed Grebes have been found and young of Wood Ducks are seen every summer. On several occasions juvenile King Rails and Virginia Rails have been seen and it is assumed that Sora breed there, as adults are present throughout the spring and summer. Marsh Wrens and Woodcock are probably breeding birds of the area.

Later in the summer there occurs an infallible influx of Herons -- Black Crowns, Yellow Crowns, Great Blues, Little Blues, Greens, Bitterns and Egrets. A rather long drawn out and irregular migration of Ducks begins in August and movements of these waterfowl usually continue throughout the winter. The shore bird migration is particularly interesting here, and something of a novelty for inlanders. I have stopped guessing what next will turn up at Leetown so far as shore birds are concerned. Among notable finds there have been Stilt, White-rumped and Western Sandpipers; Semi-palmated and Black-bellied Plovers; Ruddy Turnstones, Wilson's Phalaropes, Dowitchers and others. I am less familiar with the spring migrations at the ponds, but I have seen enough of it to know that the movement of ducks during March and April is particularly outstanding. Coots, Gulls and Terns occur sparingly in spring and fall.

In connection with mention of water birds at Leetown, it is to be noted here that four streams are in the vicinity: the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers and Opequon and Back Creeks. The Shenandoah River flows northward into West Virginia from the wide valley to the south in Virginia. There is a possibility of invasion by southern forms along this water course. Wood Ducks occur along all of these streams in considerable numbers and I am surprised each summer to see so many young. In late summer I have seen flocks of them, numbering anywhere from ten to 70 birds, each. Herons, the Osprey and other fish-eating birds frequent the waterways.

Another area of interest, with which I am less familiar, is the rather extensive marsh about two miles southwest of Charles Town in Jefferson County. I know very little about it excepting that King Rails and Short-billed Marsh Wrens nested there in the summer of 1938.

A large number of "pine hills" and shale barren areas occur in Berkeley County and these have their distinctive bird populations. Among these regions mention might be made of Prairie Warblers, Pine Warblers and Summer Tanagers. Black Vultures apparently roam the valley at all times of the year and they present a promising possibility for a new breeding record.

The mountain areas of Morgan County are, so far as I know, almost unexplored in an ornithological sense. I have been in the territory but little, but Mr. A. B. Brooks tells me that Duck Hawks have bred there and I know of Eagles recorded during the summer months. It is possible that they, too, breed in the area.

This paper falls far short of presenting anything like a complete picture of the bird life of the Eastern Panhandle, nor does it suggest all the possible ornithological discoveries of the area. Concerning possibilities, an outstanding case in point is Mr. Karl W. Haller's discovery, in 1939, of a new species of Wood Warbler in Berkeley and Jefferson Counties.

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FIELD NOTES

Nesting of the Pied-billed Grebe:- On May 31, 1939, Mr. Karl Haller and myself were wading through the upper end of the reservoir at the hatchery at Leetown, Jefferson County, W. Va., looking for nests of Wood Ducks. He had flushed several pairs of Wood Ducks and had seen a small group of downy young. We separated and began a systematic search through the willow-sycamore growth which stands in the shallow water there. Mr. Haller found a nest which proved to be that of a Pied-billed Grebe, Podilymbus podiceps.

The nest was a flat cone of aquatic vegetation which had been worked into a floating "island". It contained seven, pale, cream-colored eggs which were in a symmetrical depression at the apex of the "cone".

On the same afternoon, I returned and took several photographs of the nest and eggs. Each time the nest was visited, a layer of weeds was found covering and concealing the eggs.

On June 2, 1939, three of the eggs presumably had hatched and the young had left the nest. At any rate, I found only four eggs in the nest on that date. Several shell fragments were found on the bottom of the pond some distance from the nest. I heard what I believe were young Grebes but was unable to locate them. An adult called quite often, as if to attract attention. Each time I sought to follow the sound, an adult Grebe would appear and subsequently would dive with considerable splashing -- a maneuver which I interpreted as one designed to attract my attention away from the young which, presumably were near. On several occasions another adult Grebe answered the calls made by the bird I was watching.

-- J. Lloyd Poland
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Wild Turkey in Hardy County, W. Va.:- The Moorefield, W. Va. Examiner reported a total of 284 Wild Turkey, Meleagris gallopavo, taken by hunters in Hardy County, West Virginia, during the open season of October 16-November 30, 1939. This total exceeds by 90 birds the reported total kill of the open season of 1938. One Turkey a season is the legal bag limit for each hunter. The Examiner editor terms Hardy County "the Wild Turkey capital of the Nation!"

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

Behavior of Ruffed Grouse in Hardy County, W. Va.:- The Ruffed Grouse, Bonasa umbellus, usually is considered one of the wildest of game birds, but an experience on April 2, 1940, has convinced me that this was not true for at least one individual of the species.

On that date, while driving an automobile on one of the roads in Lost River State Park, Hardy County, W. Va., I saw a Grouse flush from the brushy road border and subsequently noted a second Grouse on a limb of a tree about 20 feet above the ground and directly above the spot from which the first bird noted

had flown. I reversed the car and stopped it very near the bird in the tree. To my surprise, this Grouse held its place. My young son, Jack, and I got out of the car and walked to a point under the limb on which the bird was perched. I lifted Jack as high as I could and he laughed and "talked" to the perched bird, waving his hands as he tried to "reach" it. His hands were less than 12 feet from the Grouse, which seemed to pay little attention to either of us as it walked back and forth along the tree limb.

We left the place and, after a half-hour interval returned. To our surprise the Grouse was still there. Believing by this time that the Grouse might be injured and unable to fly, I shook the limb on which it was perched and the bird eventually flew away.

Since this experience, a number of outdoorsmen have told me of a similar behavior by other Grouse which seemed to pay no attention to the presence of humans.

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

Races of Grackles in West Virginia:- For some time there has been considerable speculation as to the status of Grackles in West Virginia. The question has arisen in my own mind numerous times and despite claims made by some that the sub-species of Quiscalus quiscula can be distinguished in the field under very favorable light conditions, I have never been satisfied with any of my own "sight records".

For this reason, together with a considerable amount of stimulation engendered by the reading of some of Dr. Frank M. Chapman's publications on Quiscalus, I collected rather a limited series of Grackles while a member of the West Virginia University Biological Expedition during the summer of 1939.

I sent the 35 specimens to Dr. Chapman for his subspecific identification and of these, he determined the identity of eleven specimens. The skins were prepared by myself and I admit they were rather poorly done, while a large proportion of the birds were females or immatures.

Dr. Chapman's system involves representing the four described subspecies by numbers, as follows: (1) Quiscalus quiscula quiscula; (2) Q. q. stonei; (3) Q. q. ridgwayi; and (4) Q. q. aeneus. The four races show complete intergradation and it often is difficult to decide definitely which race a given bird represents. Because of these interspecific differences being matters of degree, fractions have been used to designate border-line cases.

I list here the races found, with dates and localities for each. All the birds are believed to have been breeding males excepting the last, which may have completed its breeding activity for the season.

Quiscalus quiscula stonei (2). June 9, Leetown Hatchery, Jefferson County:
(2-1/4). June 6, near Martinsburg, Berkeley County.

Quiscalus q. ridgwayi (3). June 6, near Martinsburg, Berkeley County.
(3). June 26, near Organ Cave, Monroe County.
(3). June 28, near Organ Cave, Monroe County.
(3). June 30, near Organ Cave, Greenbrier County.
(3). June 30, near Organ Cave, Monroe County.

(3-1/4). July 3, near Franklin, Pendleton County.
(3-1/2). July 4, near Franklin, Pendleton County.

Quiscalus q. aeneus. (4). June 18, near Weston, Lewis County.
(3-7/8). July 4, near Franklin, Pendleton County.

These noted by no means indicate any complete conception as to the distribution of these races within the State. A much more extensive series is needed before any idea as to the various ranges can be worked out. However, in a preliminary way, I felt this information of enough value to warrant publication.

-- J. Lloyd Poland
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Observations in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia:- The following notes concern certain interesting birds observed in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia:

Least Bittern. Ixobrychus exilis. The only specimens which I know from the Eastern Panhandle are two, a male and a female, taken by Dr. George M. Sutton, at Leetown, on July 15, 1937.

Goshawk. Astur atricapillus. I watched an adult bird as it perched in a tree near the upper end of the reservoir of the Federal fish hatchery at Leetown on the morning of October 20, 1939. The bird remained perched about ten minutes before it took wing.

White-rumped Sandpiper. Pisobia fuscicollis. A specimen was taken by me at Leetown, May 31, 1939, as it was feeding with a flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers.

Long-billed Marsh Wren. Telmatodytes palustris. That this Wren nests in the Eastern Panhandle seems not to be definitely known, but I have the following observations to record: A full juvenal male was taken one mile south of Charles Town, Jefferson County, in a large marsh, on August 28, 1939. Lloyd Poland and I failed to find Long-bills at this place in May, 1939. However, on October 25, 1939, at this marsh, I saw two Long-billed Marsh Wrens.

Short-billed Marsh Wren. Cistothorus stellaris. An adult male, in worn plumage, was shot at a marsh one mile south of Charles Town, Jefferson County, August 28, 1939. About eight birds were seen or heard as I walked through the marsh. On October 25, 1939, there were at least three short-bills there.

Golden-winged Warbler. Vermivora chrysoptera. At Leetown, on August 24, 1939, I saw and observed for several minutes, a lone Golden-winged Warbler in a small grove near the fish hatchery.

-- Karl W. Haller
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EDITORIAL COMMENT

The "Eastern Panhandle Edition". In many respects, this issue of The Redstart constitutes an "Eastern Panhandle Edition." Various field notes received by the editor were deliberately set aside to accompany in the same issue, Mr. J. Lloyd Poland's tempting invitation for bird students to visit his home area in West Virginia.

The Redstart has had many valuable contributions from Mr. Poland and, lately, from Mr. Karl W. Haller as a result of their ornithological work in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. We look forward with interest to more such articles and field notes from these gentlemen and other observers as well. The botanists long since have "discovered" the Eastern Panhandle, particularly those men and women interested in ferns. One session of the West Virginia Nature Association's Nature Training School was held at Camp Frame, in Berkeley County, for two weeks and at that time a number of amateurs in bird study had their eyes opened to the splendid possibilities of the region.

A joint meeting of the Brooks Bird Club and the Virginia Society of Ornithology has been tentatively suggested a time or two by individuals interested in a closer relationship between these two groups. Perhaps one day in the near future, such a meeting can be worked out and might well be arranged in the Eastern Panhandle. Maryland ornithologists, also near neighbors of the Panhandle bird students, might well join in such a meeting.

In the meantime, we are prepared to accept all that Mr. Poland says in praise of the Panhandle and its bird life. Mr. Poland's personal modesty can't conceal the fact that he is a very competent ornithologist and a keen observer who will do all that one person can to keep abreast of ornithological developments of his home territory.

-- J. W. H.

Slippery Rock Meeting Cancelled:- The nature week-end at Slippery Rock State Teachers College originally scheduled as a spring feature of the Brooks Bird Club program was cancelled. Dr. R. A. Waldron, of the Pennsylvania school notified the Brooks Bird Club that plans had not developed as anticipated. He added the reassuring word that he hoped it might be possible to hold a week-end nature program next fall. The program was originally planned to help celebrate the completion of a new science building, but this structure will not be available this spring and the scheduled celebration has therefore been cancelled by the State College officials.

-- J. W. H.

The Redstart:- Throughout the seven years of the existence of this publication the subscription list has been constant. This indicates that The Redstart has met with the approval of the readers. It also indicates that the information appearing in this monthly is of interest to professionals. Now, after these years of experience, we believe that we can justify a larger subscription list. We have our own machines, typewriter, mimeograph and stapler to do a good job every month. The members of the club are, more than ever, offering good articles and good field notes for the journal. So, if you know of any interested students, amateur or professional, any institution, museum, library or school, send the names to us at Wheeling and we will gladly forward a sample copy for consideration.

-- J. W. H.

The Bird Club Foray:- Readers of The Redstart have been notified of the forthcoming ornithological foray of the Bird Club, set for June 15-22, inclusive, with Lost River State Park, W. Va., as headquarters for the party. As this is written, a full week before the expiration of the time limit for reservations, a total of 26 foray members is assured. The Club's Foray Committee looks forward with full confidence to an overflow participation by members of this organization.

One item implied in announcements of the foray seems to puzzle out-of-town observers --- the fact that the dates conflict with those normally occupied by activities of the Nature Training Schools which for the past twelve years have been operated by the West Virginia Nature Association. The latter organization is not operating a school this year. The "gang" which normally had much to do with these affairs is concentrating its attention on the Bird Club Foray and will not take part in any nature school activities in 1940.

An original maximum of 30 participants was set for the foray. By the time this appears, we have every reason to believe that at least that number of individuals will have applied for reservations. However, if we know immediately that a few others wish to take part, it is possible that additional accommodations at Lost River State Park may be arranged to permit a slight expansion of the group. This is no promise, of course, but the Foray Committee headed by Charles "Chuck" Conrad will be willing to do their best to take care of late comers.

The \$15.00 which members of the foray will pay for lodging, board and incidental expenses at Lost River Park will buy what promises to be the most enjoyable outdoors week of one's experience. We are assured of very comfortable, modern lodgings, of the best meals that Chef Bert Cromes can prepare -- and that's something -- and the companionship of a group vitally interested in bird study and its allied subjects, as well as interested in having a grand, good time.

-- Russell West