



The Redstart

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Edited by J. W. Handlan

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HOW MANY WOULD YOU SAY?

by

Mr. & Mrs. A. B. Brooks

For several years we have been asking ourselves the question - "How many visits to our feeder do birds make in a day?" Although a number of one-hour and two-hour counts were made during the Winter of 1934-35, it was not until recently that a full day's record was kept. Believing that the information thus obtained will be of interest to the reader, and hoping that it may induce others to make similar counts in various places and under different conditions, we submit the following account for publication in The Redstart.

At our farm at French Creek, West Virginia, we keep a bird-feeder stocked with food during a vacation period from November 1 to January 31, each year. When we are away, a neighbor boy looks after the feeder. The kinds of foods used are, generally, the same, consisting of suet, cracked corn and scratch feed, black walnut and hickory nut kernels, sunflower seeds, corn meal siftings, or oatmeal, and, sometimes, pieces of corn bread. The covered feeder is hung by wires to the eaves of a sun porch and is, therefore, very close to the window.

On January 22, 1936, we kept a record by species and hours, of the number of visits made by birds for food, keeping the feeder under constant observation from the time of the first visit, at 7:05 a.m., until the departure of the last bird of the day at 5:40 p.m. Juncos were first to arrive in the morning, followed by a Cardinal at 7:08, a Tree Sparrow at 7:10 and a Titmouse at 7:15. Toward the close of the day, as indicated by the accompanying table, the number of species fell off rapidly, beginning about 3:00 o'clock. The busiest period was from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. A flock of Tree Sparrows and Juncos had almost undisputed possession for the last hour and one-half, the former species remaining to feed for fifteen minutes after all others had left.

The total number of visits was 4,355. The bird patrons were: Tufted Titmouse, Chickadee, Cardinal, Junco, Tree Sparrow, Downy Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Carolina Wren. Blue Jays fed frequently from the ground under the feeder, being supplied with morsels of food scratched out by the Juncos and Tree Sparrows. The nearness of the feeder to the window, and the observer back of it, evidently prevented the Jays from coming. The shy Cardinals, also, appeared to visit the feeder less often than usual, apparently for the same reason.

It is impossible to give the exact number of individual birds, of course, but it was about as follows:

Titmouse 8; Chickadee 4; Cardinal 8; Junco 20; Tree Sparrow 25; Downy Woodpecker 4; Red-bellied Woodpecker 2; White-breasted Nuthatch 2; Red-breasted Nuthatch 2; Carolina Wren 2; Blue Jay 4.

If the total visits were equally divided among the estimated 81 individuals, there would be 53.7 visits each. But it did not work out that way. For example, the Titmice led all others with 1,648 visits, or 205 visits for each bird. Actually, some individuals must have made twice that number of calls. The Tree Sparrows and Juncos took second and third places. These two species spent much more time at the feeder than any others, often remaining for several minutes to feed deliberately. The Titmice, on their frequent visits, snatched sunflower seeds or other food and flew away. The Red-bellied Woodpeckers were the most nervous and wary visitors among the lot.

The behavior of birds while feeding could be discussed at length. Certain individual Tree Sparrows are dictators, occasionally holding the feeder against all comers for some time. They quarrel among themselves, and with their Junco associates, becoming more quarrelsome toward the end of the day. Juncos did more scolding and chattering than the others. The Carolina Wrens and the Red-breasted Nuthatches seemed to have but little fear of the larger species.

There was not a space of more than 30 seconds that the feeder was not occupied, or being visited, by some bird, except for the following interruptions. When the food was renewed, twice during the day, the birds returned each time within one minute. But when an unidentified Hawk made two calls, the situation was different. The first time, a flash of the Hawk's wings was seen against the window, followed immediately by a flight of all birds to the cover of some nearby rose bushes. There they "froze" for about three minutes. When they "thawed out" they returned at once to the feeder, seeming to forget completely all possible danger. The second visit of the Hawk was marked by a similar demonstration. The one glimpse of the Hawk indicated that it was of a large species, possibly not interested in the birds, but flying about in search of other prey.

Our pet Rose-breasted Grosbeak, which sat in the sun porch looking out at the time of the Hawk's visit, acted in precisely the same manner as did the outside birds, except that there was no rose bush for it to take shelter in!

The day on which the record was made was cold and sun-shiny, with snow covering the ground. It is our observation that bird feeders have the largest patronage on days when it is cold and snowing. A one-hour count made at this feeder from 8:40 to 9:40 a.m., January 20, 1936, when snow was falling, showed 745 visits by ten species. This indicates that, on the most favorable days, as many as seven or eight thousand visits may be made.

Following is a table showing the number of visits made to the feeder by species and hours, the numbers of individual birds participating being estimated, above:

VISITS BY BIRDS AT A FEEDING STATION DURING A SINGLE DAY

Hours	Red-bellied Woodpecker	Downy Woodpecker	Chickadee	Tufted Titmouse	White-breasted Nuthatch	Red-breasted Nuthatch	Carolina Wren	Cardinal	Junco	Tree Sparrow	Total Visits per hour
A.M.											
7:05- 8	1			61	3		2		56	54	177
8 - 9	6	20	10	181					66	77	360
9 -10	2	18	26	218	1	17		1	51	92	426
10 -11	1	11	14	242	1	43	2		91	124	529
11 -12	1	20	51	201	5	22	5		92	123	520
P.M.											
12 - 1	1	10	37	228		1	2		58	93	432
1 - 2	5	11	17	205		9	3		54	107	411
2 - 3		10	34	249		5	5	6	61	132	502
3 - 4		3	65	61		7			109	170	415
4 - 5		9	25			6		3	142	220	405
5 - 5:40		5	1					3	50	119	178
Visits by species	19	117	280	1646	10	110	19	15	830	1311	4355 Total

French Creek, W.Va.
Jan. 23, 1936

MARCH MEETING

The Brooks Bird Club will hold its regular meeting on March 27, 1936, at the second-floor offices in Oglebay Park. The meeting will convene at 8 p.m., and guests are welcome.

Mr. George Flouer will discuss the scientist-sportsman conflict which has recently been made more manifest than ever. Other papers will be offered by Mr. Leo Tighe and by Mr. Earl Sliger.

FIELD NOTES

Mute Swan on Lake Erie. On January 26, 1936, at Gordon Park, on Lake Erie, Mrs. Skaggs and I saw a Mute Swan, Sthenelides cler, I believe this is the first record for Cleveland. The swan was with some Scaup, Nyroca, and Red-breasted Mergansers, Mergus serrator.

---M. B. Skaggs
Cleveland, Ohio.

Whistling Swan on the Ohio River. To an observer with little acquaintance with water birds, the sight of three Whistling Swans, Cygnus columbianus, on the Ohio River, Sept. 22, 1935, was an experience long to be remembered. These birds, two adults in pure white plumage and an immature with mottled plumage, were found near the lower end of Big Sister Island, near Warwood, Wheeling, W.Va.

While watching the Swans, observers heard a peculiar sound, given at brief intervals, which sounded like an attempt to call the birds. Binoculars trained on a houseboat disclosed two men who apparently were waiting for the birds to drift near them with the current. It was presumed that these men were making the sound with the hope that the birds would approach close enough for a shot. Something frightened the swans, however, and they rose from the surface, flew up-river a short distance, circled and disappeared down-stream. The slow, powerful wing-beats carried the huge birds with little apparent effort.

Newspaper reports the following day carried the story that a flock of 23 swans, on the Ohio River near Wellsburg, W.Va., the same day, had not been harmed by gunfire from the shore. Russell Hogg, a resident of that city and a careful observer of birds, has told the writer that swans are to be seen every Fall during migration on the river bordering Brooke County, W.Va.

---Russell West,
Wheeling, W.Va.

Red-breasted Nuthatch at Oglebay Park. There appear to be comparatively few Winter records of the Red-breasted Nuthatch, Sitta canadensis, in the vicinity of Wheeling, W.Va. and the following is submitted for what it is worth. On January 26, 1936, we watched a Red-breasted Nuthatch at Oglebay Park, Wheeling. The example was feeding in a mixed growth of Hemlock and Austrian Pine during the ten minutes we watched it. During most of that time, it hung, head-down from Hemlock sprays and investigated with its beak the plentiful cones within reach. The bird fearlessly fed within six to ten feet of where we stood and we put aside our 7x binoculars to watch it without their help.

---Mr. & Mrs. J.W. Handlan,
Wheeling, W.Va.

Mississippi Song Sparrow in Ohio County. Dr. Max M. Peet, of the University of Michigan, on March 25 and 26, 1932, obtained permission to collect several birds at Oglebay Park, Ohio County, West Virginia. I accompanied Dr. Peet on those dates over some of the more remote trails in the Park. Dr. Peet took four specimens of Song Sparrow which, upon identification, proved to be Melospiza melodia beata, the Mississippi Song Sparrow. The identification was by Mr. W.E.C. Todd, of the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh.

Two of the specimens, writes Dr. Peet, were very fat and two were very thin. From this he suggests that two were migrants and that two had wintered here.

---A. B. Brooks,
Wheeling, W.Va.

Snow Bunting in Belmont County, Ohio. On November 29, 1935, Mrs. Skaggs and I saw a single Snow Bunting, Plectrophenax n. nivalis, near the Belmont Hills Country Club at St. Clairsville, Belmont County, Ohio. The bird was associated with a mixed flock of Northern and Prairie Horned Larks, Otocoris alpestris. Since this location is but 12 miles from Wheeling, the note seemed of local interest to the group of amateur ornithologists there.

---M.B. Skaggs,
Cleveland, Ohio.

A Correction and Criticism is Offered. According to the accepted belief, the Allegheny Mountains mark the western limit of Dendroica palmarum hypochrysea (see Chapman, Warblers of North America, p. 214) and thus, the form occurring in the West Virginia Panhandle would be D. p. palmarum (Western Palm Warbler) and not D. p. hypochrysea (Yellow Palm Warbler), as listed recently by Haller, Redstart, III, p. 38. The error in choice of name is doubtless attributable to the more or less misleading statement of the range of this species in the A.O.U. Check-List. It is not impossible, of course, for aberrant individuals of the eastern race to stray, occasionally, into our region, but conclusive determination of them should be made only with the specimen in hand.

The Gray-cheeked Thrush is as easily identified in the field as are the Olive-backed Thrush and the Veery, and at times even out-numbers these latter species in abundance. The careful bird student will not need high-power binoculars and variable conditions of light, as Haller suggests (p. 38), if he knows the distinguishing characteristics of the members of this group. Moreover, according to W. E. Clyde Todd, who has seen countless hundreds of the various species of Hylocichla, the Gray-cheeked Thrush may readily be identified by its distinctive call-note, alone, even in its migratory flight.

---Ruth Trimble,
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Sub-specific Identifications. Most active members of The Brooks Bird Club lay little stress on the attempted field recognition of birds in their sub-specific forms, and omit trinomial designations whenever there may be a doubt as to the accuracy of the application. A number of resident birds in the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia are among the species which have been divided into geographical races. These should be studied to determine, definitely, the forms represented in this area, so that field records may be more nearly correct.

---Russell West,
Wheeling, W.Va.

EDITORIAL

This Matter of Names. The two communications which immediately precede this bring to attention, once more, a matter which, perhaps, never will be satisfactorily settled for all of us.

Miss Trimble's note is of especial interest, because of its specific nature and because of her position as Assistant Curator of Ornithology, The Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh. She takes exception to a record published by Mr. Karl Haller, of Wheeling, W.Va., a student at West Virginia University, Morgantown.

The Editor deliberately permitted Mr. Haller's sub-specific designation of a race of the Palm Warbler to remain in the note published in The Redstart for February (III, 38). He confesses that he was unable to find a specimen-in-hand record for the eastern race of this bird for the general area in West Virginia under consideration. Dr. George M. Sutton's annotation of "rare migrant" in reference to the Panhandle status of Dendroica palmarum hypochrysea, presumably refers to a sight record by A. B. Brooks and others. (The Cardinal, III, 5, Jan., 1933, p. 119). However, Haller, J.T. Handlan, Margolin and Maurice Brooks found "large flocks" of Palm Warblers in Monongalia County from October 3 into December, 1935, and noted that: "many were bright yellow and were, doubtless, D. p. hypochrysea." (The Redstart, III, p. 27).

The Editor quite understands the reluctance of a professional ornithologist to pass without comment a sight-identification of an eastern race in a western setting. It is not his purpose, here, to pursue what inevitably must be a fruitless discussion of the merits and demerits of the case at hand.

It is his purpose to point to this difference in viewpoint as being one of a kind which will invariably arise when field identification of anywise "difficult" races is made, or attempted, even by expert field ornithologists. For that matter, certain specific identifications are difficult enough in the field, as witness the Scaup Ducks and the Chickadees.

And, for the purposes of the amateur ornithologist, at least, why need he worry about difficult racial distinctions as he compiles his daily roll call?

There are, as Mr. West indicates above, unsolved problems of racial distribution in the Panhandle and, for that matter, throughout much of West Virginia. These are professional problems, of interest, at most, to a very limited number of the people of this area actively engaged in bird study. The Editor, personally, declines to identify "difficult" races in the field. He has no doubt, however, that there are field men who can do so.

The discussion at hand brings to mind an exceedingly interesting article by Ludlow Griscom on "Modern Problems in Field Identification," in the current issue of Bird Lore. (XXXVIII, 1, Jan.-Feb., 1936, pp. 12-18). It is emphatically worth the reading and careful consideration of anyone interested in the field study of birds, as well as pertinent to this discussion.

Two other relevant references may be followed up with advantage in this same connection. These are: a book review and editorial note by Mr. T.C. Stephens in The Wilson Bulletin (XLV, 4, Dec., 1933, pp. 206-08) and a communication from Mr. Samuel A. Eliot, jr. in The Wilson Bulletin (XLVI, 1, Mar., 1934, pp. 71-2).

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