



# The Redstart

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## WEST VIRGINIA'S "VERMIN-KILLING CONTESTS" OF 1937

by  
John W. Handlan

Official report of the 1937 "vermin-killing contests" conducted by organized sportsmen's groups in 26 counties of West Virginia during 1937 is made in West Virginia Conservation Bulletin for January, 1938, (Issue 17) mimeographed at Charleston, West Virginia, by the State Conservation Commission.

The issue itemizes, as follows, the total of 109,456 animals killed in the course of these contests and officially recorded:

"Wildcat	68
Hunting House Cat	5,675
Gray Fox	910
Weasel	988
Great-horned Owl	752
Hawks (Pigeon, Goshawk, Sharp-shin and Coopers)	2,424
Mud Turtle	9,007
Water Dog	6,524
Snake (Water-, Rattle-, and Copperhead)	50,970
Crow	8,389
Red Squirrel	490
Garfish	424
Common Rat	19,452
Not specified	3,383"

A subsequent issue of the Conservation Bulletin (Issue 18, February, 1938) relates, also, the success of Mr. Warren Webb, 16-year-old high school junior of Posey, Raleigh County, W.Va., in winning a \$250.00 scholarship at a Fairmont, W.Va., business school in the course of a high school "vermin-killing contest."

Young Mr. Webb accounted, personally, for 1,269 animals in winning his award, according to the Bulletin. Included in his list was an item of 1,009 snakes of which he says "as many as 800" were water-snakes and adds that the remainder consisted "of mostly copperhead snakes." His "mud turtle" kill was 22 and that of "water dogs," 22 also. Birds reported by Mr. Webb included two Great-horned Owls, 17 "Goshawks," and one Crow.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with "vermin" contests, it may be said here that in those with which the writer is personally familiar identification of the creatures killed is left to the killer. Judges were no more able to identify the animals brought to them than were the contestants, themselves. "Mud Turtles," for example, probably were examples of the Snapping Turtle, Chelydra, and "water dogs" may be either Necturus or Cryptobranchus. As to the ability of sportsmen, even of above-average sportsmen, to distinguish species of hawks and owls, the reader is referred to references appended to this brief article (4,5,6 and 11).

The 2,424 "Pigeon Hawks, Goshawks, Sharp-shins and Cooper's" for which points were awarded in the contest for adults, may have been (but probably were not!) accurately identified. A compilation of 14 years of records by 20 competent Ohio observers (1) showed that, of 21,606 hawks recorded, exactly 86 records of the Pigeon Hawk and 32 observations of the Goshawk were listed. Only 1,168 Cooper's Hawks and 498 Sharp-shinned Hawks were in the total of 21,606 hawks observed.

Going back to Mr. Webb's report of 17 "Goshawks" killed, he writes: "I killed a good many hawks by shooting them down with a gun, or by cutting down the dead trees that they built their nests in, and destroying both young and old."

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Goshawks nest in West Virginia, even though there are no records for such a nesting so far as the author is aware. They are known to have nested in the mountains of western Maryland and in Pennsylvania. The principal range of breeding Goshawks is, authorities point out, Canada, the New England states and, sparingly, the fringe of other northern States on the Canadian border. Authorities consulted on the nesting of the Goshawk include Bent (2), Forbush (9), Gromme (10), Roberts (12), Chapman (3) and, for the Western race, Dawson (7) and the recent publication of the Dixcn's (8).

Taciturn as mountain boys are prone to be, there is the strong suspicion that, had young Mr. Webb actually destroyed "both young and old" at nests of the Goshawk, he would have deemed his experiences a bit more worthy of comment than is the laconic explanation above! It is illuminating to note that Goshawks build their nests in "dead trees."

The Ohio compilation of Hawk observations was composed of Pigeon Hawk records to the extent of four-tenths of one per cent. of the total. The Goshawk records constituted one-tenth of one per cent., that of Sharp-shins, 2.3 per cent. and that of Cooper's Hawks, 5.4 per cent. of the total. These four forms, then, represented a combined percentage of 8.2 per cent. of the 21,606 hawks listed.

This total, however, was achieved by compiling annual totals for 14 years, an average of approximately 1,543 hawks of all species recorded annually. Only twenty observers were consulted in this record-compilation, of course, and, in West Virginia, with hunters of 26 counties busy seeking "vermin" it is natural to assume that even uninformed amateurs would see many more hawks than would a score of scattered observers in Ohio. But "Pigeon Hawks, Goshawks, Sharp-shins and Cooper's" to the extent of 2,424 in a single year --- that's pretty difficult to accept.

The asserted fact that young Webb killed 17 Goshawks in a single year in Raleigh, partly by destruction at the nest, is incredible, in a state in which the Goshawk is not known to breed.

How many Red-tails, Red-shoulders, Broad-wings and other useful birds went into the count as "Pigeon Hawks, Goshawks," etc. is, of course, impossible to say. The strong suspicion exists that beneficial hawks made up the bulk of the total reported as proscribed species, if their percentage of the State's Hawk population is similar to that in Ohio.

How much damage West Virginia sportsmen are doing in these broadside "vermin-killing contests" is impossible to say. Certain it is that with all this killing of "vermin" the game in which these gunners are primarily and naturally interested does not increase at a rate commensurate with the destruction of "natural enemies."

#### REFERENCES:

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- (2) Bent, A. C., "Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey (Order Falconiformes, Vol. I)" pp. 125-142 (United States Government Printing Office, 1937)
- (3) Chapman, Frank M., "Handbook of the Birds of Eastern North America," 3rd. rev. ed., pp. 217-218, (D.Appleton & Co., New York, 1932).
- (4) Christy, Bayard H., "A Legislative Mistake," The Cardinal, Vol. II, No. 8 pp. 226-232, July, 1930 (Audubon Club of the Sewickley, Pa.)

- (5) Dadisman, A.J., "Umbrellas Needed by Sportsmen," West Virginia Wild Life, Vol. 12, Nos. 4-5, P. 11, April-May, 1934 (Wild Life League of West Virginia, Fairmont).
- (6) Dadisman, A.J., "More About Hawks and Owls," West Virginia Wild Life, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 6, February, 1936 (Wild Life League of West Virginia, Fairmont).
- (7) Dawson, William Leon, "The Birds of California," Vol. IV, pp. 1668-1672, (South Moulton Co., San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Calif., 1923).
- (8) Dixon, James B., and Dixon, Ralph E., "Nesting of the Western Goshawk in California," The Condor, Vol. XL, No. 1, pp. 3-11, January-February, 1938 (Cooper Ornithological Club, Berkeley, California.)
- (9) Forbush, E.H., "Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States," Vol. II, pp 116-123, (Norwood Press, Norwood Mass., 1929).
- (10) Gromme, E.J., "The Goshawk (Astur atricapillus atricapillus) Nesting in Wisconsin," The Auk, Vol. LII, No. 1, pp. 15-20, January, 1935 (The American Ornithologists' Union, Lancaster, Pa.)
- (11) Handlan, John W., "Hawk Sanctuary Founded," West Virginia Wild Life, Vol. 13, Nos. 3-4, pp. 1-2 and 5, March-April, 1935 (Wild Life League of West Virginia, Fairmont).
- (12) Roberts, T.S., "The Birds of Minnesota," Vol. 1, pp. 302-305, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1932).

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ERRORS

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Top of page 14 (Vol. 5, No. 3) write in Title as follows: "Some Autumn Birds of the Carolina Coast Area," by "John Handlan, Polly Handlan and Charles Conrad."

On page 16 of the same number and volume, the 30th line read "Blue Goose, Chen caerulescens."

The errors were the Editor's.

-- J.W.H.

## FIELD NOTES

Woodcock With Young in Preston County, W.Va. Along the back road which bordered the Nature Training School Camp at Lake Terra Alta, Preston County, W.Va., in late June, 1937, several of the campers reported hearing Woodcock, Philohela minor. Dr. George M. Sutton, who was at the camp, reported he had heard adult Woodcock and was reasonably sure he had heard sounds made by young of the species. I made several visits to the vicinity in which these sounds had been heard and finally was rewarded. From the road, early one morning, I heard the notes of a Woodcock and heard and saw movements in the brush at the road-edge, some 10 or 12 feet beyond the point at which I stood. An adult Woodcock then crossed the road, walking, followed by four young. The birds moved across the road and into the woods beyond. I continued on my way and, on my return trip toward camp, "strange as it seems," again saw presumably the same adult and four young return across the road to the underbrush from which they had originally appeared.

---Charles Conrad  
Warwood, W.Va.

Behavior of a Ruffed Grouse in Defending its Young. During the latter part of June, 1937, when staff and students of the Nature Training School then camped at Lake Terra Alta, Preston County, W.Va., visited Cranesville Swamp, also in Preston County, Thomas John, Edward Westlake, Leonard Llewellyn and the writer accompanied Dr. George M. Sutton on a short bird-collecting trip. In a thickly wooded section, in which huge Hemlocks stood, we flushed a Ruffed Grouse, Bonasa umbellus, and at least four Grouse chicks. We then observed remarkable fearlessness and devotion to her young on the part of what proved to be a female Grouse.

Dr. Sutton and the others were in advance of myself and the adult Grouse, after a short flight remained in plain sight of them, quite near. The chicks scattered, one ran directly toward me, as I stood partly concealed by a tree. In answer to a question of mine, Dr. Sutton said he would like to have the chick which had settled very near to me and after a short pursuit, I picked it up as it tried to hide beneath a root.

The little fellow pecked my fingers and uttered a few "peeps," as I held it, I joined the other members of the party, exhibiting the chick to them and we then witnessed something which, Dr. Sutton remarked, we might see only "once in a lifetime."

When the adult Grouse heard the calls of the captured young one, she obviously became a very furious bird. As we stood still, watching her, she came very near, so near that, at one time, Westlake might have extended his hand and touched her. The feathers on head, neck and upper back were erected as she "hissed" with the ferocity of a cat. She did not actually fly at me, although she soon spotted her captive chick, and we believed her ready to do so. We finally released the chick, agreeing that the mother bird's courage had fully earned her right to have it.

---Charles Conrad  
Warwood, W.Va.

Number of Visits by Birds to a Feeding Shelf: On January 28, 1938, my brother-in-law, Mr. E.L. Bobbitt, who was convalescing from illness at our home, and I watched a bird-feeding shelf just outside a window of the house. The ground, on that day, was partially snow-covered and the temperature well below freezing. Mr. Bobbitt recorded numbers of visits to the feeder from 1:20 to 2:20 o'clock p.m. and listed the following number of visits: Chickadees, 54, White-breasted Nuthatches, 17, Tufted Titmice, 7, and Cardinals, 3. Presence in the yard near the feeder of two cats and two dogs, at different times, probably interferred considerably with normal use of the feeder by the birds.

From 3:00 to 3:20 o'clock, I noted a "score," of 30 Chickadees, 11 White-breasted Nuthatches, 6 Juncos and 6 Tufted Titmice. For the next five minutes no birds appeared at the feeder. From 3:25 to 3:45, however, I noted visits by Chickadees, 54, Tufted Titmice, 8, one White-breasted Nuthatch and one Junco.

During all three counting periods, numerous Juncos occupied the Rhododendrons nearby, and the ground beneath the feeder, but only those birds which actually came to the feeder were counted.

I noted that both Chickadees and Titmice "cleared out" when Nuthatches used the feeding shelf.

Total numbers of visits for the three observation periods included Chickadees 138, Nuthatches, 29, Titmice, 14, Cardinals, 3, and Juncos, 7. We venture no guess as to actual numbers of different species which used the shelf, concerning ourselves entirely with counting numbers of visits by the various species which used the feeder.

---Polly Handlan  
Oglebay Park.

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ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

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Bird-Lore

XXXIX, No. 6, Nov-Dec., 1937: - Coincident with announcement of the election of Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy to the presidency of the N.A. A.S., the new officer utilizes the "president's page" to point out organized labor's interest in wildlife conservation -- a viewpoint which has been expressed all too infrequently. The president of the Linnaean Society of New York, Joseph L. Hickey, suggests some good objectives for amateur ornithologists in his article "The Amateur Ornithologist and His Bird Club." Dr. Frank Chapman writes of "Three Barro Colorado Birds," among other features. The usual departments are well worth the attention they normally command. (National Association of Audubon Societies). ---J.W.H.

XL, No. 1, Jan.-Feb., 1938: - In the wild furore of pro and con anent President Roosevelt's bill to reorganize the governmental structure as to handling of conservation matters, it is refreshing to find the Audubon Society speaking through its president and the editors of its magazine with a constructive suggestion for a new U.S. Department of Conservation. In this proposal, frankly, as yet, only a proposal, a new Department would be created, the Department of Conservation, which would take in certain bureaus and offices from the present departments of Interior, Agriculture and Commerce. Paul Errington proves himself a writer who puts intense drama into few words in "No Quarter," an excellent bit of literary craftsmanship, and natural history to boot! "Death is Upon Them," by Douglas E. Wade reconstructs, from evidence at hand, the fate of a covey of Bob-white. This reviewer liked Lee R. Dice's "Poison and Ecology," a temperate and thoughtful approach to a subject often obscured by the heat of antagonism or protagonism with which it is considered. The 1937 Christmas census lists, including that of The Brooks Bird Club, occupy many pages. (National Association of Audubon Societies).

---J.W.H.

Cardinal, The

IV, No. 7, January, 1938: - Maurice Brocks, writing on "Some Aspects of the Subspecies Problem in West Virginia," based his article upon the recent paper by Dr. Alexander Wetmore on West Virginia birds. In "The White-eyed Vireo in Green County, Pennsylvania," Samuel S. Dickey gives evidences of possible nestings of this species in Monongalia County, W.Va., as well as notes on the species for Green County. Roger Terry Peterson reports Snowy Egrets and Bald Eagle noted at Pymatuning Lake, at least 14 of the Eagles being listed. Notes on the proposal by Sutton and Todd of the addition of Penthestes carolinensis extimus to the races of the Carolina Chickadee are included. An article on the Upland Plover indicates a slow growth in numbers of these birds in certain Pennsylvania areas.

---J.W.H.

Condor, The

XXXIX, No. 6, Nov.-Dec., 1937: - This number, and the succeeding one which is XL, No. 1, Jan.-Feb., 1938, contain the usual items of birds and ornithologists of the far West. In the later issue, however, is an article by James B. Dixon and Ralph E. Dixon on "The Nesting of the Western Goshawk in California," which makes excellent reading.

Apparently the western race of this savage hawk is as fiercely courageous in defending its eggs and young as its eastern relative. This issue, also, contains a matter-of-fact biography of Major Allan Brocks, ornithologist-artist, by Mrs. Marjorie Brocks. (Cooper Ornithological Club).

---J.W.H.

Natural History

XL, No. 4, Nov., 1937:- Kerry Wood dramatizes the lives of a pair of Canada Geese and their brood in an effective way in this issue of the magazine. The number contains a review of I.H. Johnston's "Crooked Bill, the Life of a Quail." XL, No. 5, December, 1937, contains the facts about the life of Shiva Temple, goal of the much-publicized scientific expedition of the summer of 1937. James Chapin contributes a "scientific detective story" in his account, "In Pursuit of the Congo Peacock." (American Museum of Natural History).

---J.W.H.

Prothonotary, The

3, No. 12, Dec., 1937:- Local records for the Buffalo region, plans for meetings and Christmas Census taking, are included in this issue. Edward C. Ulrich, in a short article, discusses the fascinating interest of swamps and their value of wildlife, including a plea for their preservation for this purpose. (Buffalo Ornithological Society)

---J.W.H.

Raven, The

VIII, Nos. 9 & 10, Sept.-Oct., 1937:- Eleanor E. Herrick writes an annotated list of the birds of Chatham, Virginia; William B. McIlwaine, jr., discusses herons and egrets on the Potomac near Alexandria; numerous notes, many by Southgate Hoyt and Dr. J. J. Murray, are included in this issue. Maurice Brooks records additional instances of hawks flying with Starlings.

VIII, Nos. 11-12, Nov.-Dec., 1937:- Dr. J. J. Murray contributes a paper of exceptional interest on "The Extension of the Range of the Black Vulture." In view of the fact that records of the Black Vulture in West Virginia are definitely increasing, this paper and the notes and suggestions it contains is of especial interest to West Virginians. With this issue, The Raven adds a department devoted to Virginia bird notes in other periodicals. (Virginia Society of Ornithology).

---J.W.H.

Wilson Bulletin, The

XLIX, No. 4, Dec., 1937:- Thomas Hume Bissonnette's extended article on "Photoperiodicity in Birds," occupies 30 pages and includes an extensive bibliography. A biography of John Maynard Wheaton should be of especial interest to Ohio ornithologists. There are articles on the food of barn owls in South Carolina, on the winter range of Harris' Sparrow and the Mockingbird in South Dakota. There are numerous notes of interest to the majority of members of the Brooks Bird Club. Some of these are: Ralph O'Reilly, jr., on a Yellow Rail near Cleveland, O. in mid-April; gull records for Lake Erie by M. B. Skaggs, including Glaucous Gull, Iceland Gull and Great Black-backed Gull; Pine Siskins in Western Maryland on July 1, 1937, by Maurice Brooks; Snowy Egrets at Pymatuning Lake, Pennsylvania, with two specimens taken, by R.L.



Fricke; and others. In the book-review section, Maurice Brooks contributes a review of Dr. Alexander Wetmore's paper on West Virginia birds. (Wilson Ornithological Club)

---J.W.H.

#### American Forests

44, No. 2, Feb., 1938:- Archibald Rutledge contributes "A Look at the Hawks" to this issue. With due regard to varying status of a race in varying localities and under varying conditions, Rutledge classifies hawks as follows:

Wholly beneficial: Rough-legged Hawk, Squirrel Hawk (Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk?), and the four Kites.

Chiefly beneficial: Broad-winged Hawk, Harris' Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, Short-winged Hawk, and Swainson's Hawk.

Of doubtful standing: Marsh Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Richardson's Pigeon Hawk, and Sparrow Hawk.

Distinctly Harmful: Cooper's Hawk, Duck Hawk, Goshawk, the four gyrfalcons, Pigeon Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

---J.W.H.