



The Redstart

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NOTES ON A SHORT-EARED OWL.

by
J. Lloyd Poland

A mile southwest of Charlestown, West Virginia, there is a marsh which is, by rough guess, some 15 to 20 acres in extent. While walking in this marsh on March 19, 1940, I found several owl pellets on a raised place well out in the marsh proper. I collected these pellets and found several more on a similar mound not far from the first. I then set out to find as many of these as possible and near various stakes and posts set in the marsh at its drier end, a considerable number of these pellets were found.

Not long after the first of the pellets had been found, a Short-eared Owl, Asio flammeus, was seen perched upon a stake out in the marsh. I watched this bird for half an hour or longer, during which time it alighted on several of the low stakes and posts in the marsh. One noticeable habit of this bird was that it moved its head continuously from side to side in an almost rhythmic manner during the entire time it was observed at its various perches.

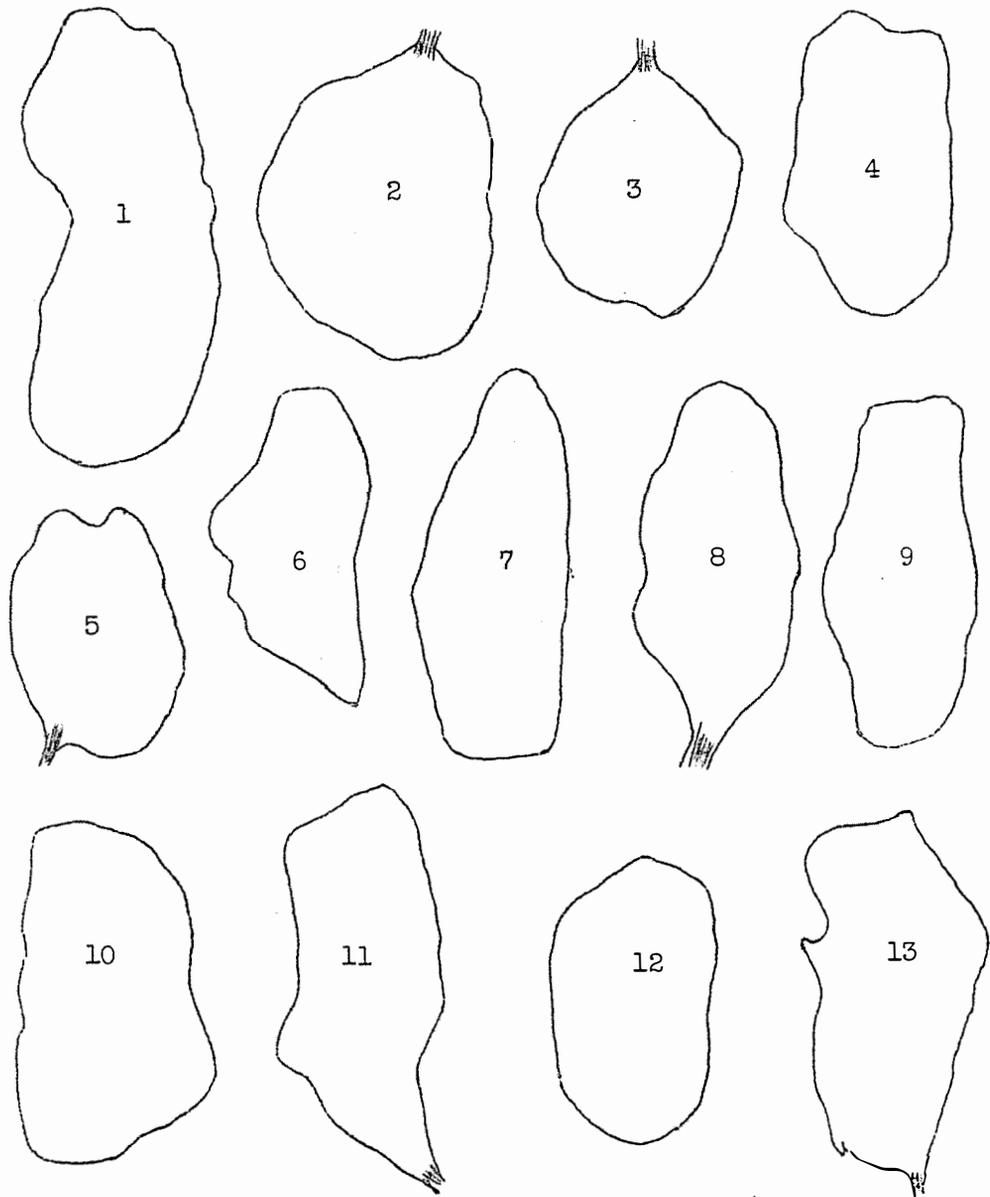
Hot cinders from a locomotive had set afire part of the marsh a few weeks previous to my visit there. Since some of the pellets found were noticeably charred, the owl probably had been there for at least that length of time. Some of the material gathered was not in definite pellets and some of the pellets themselves were well-weathered and not very compact. However, thirteen complete pellets were found together with discarded material, droppings and fragments. It is believed that twenty or more pellets are represented by the material gathered. It is assumed that everything examined was discarded by this particular owl, although, of course, this may not have been the case.

There follows a summary of the contents of the pellets examined:

Mammals - (77.7 percent of items found)

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 - <u>Ondatra</u> sp. | Muskrat. |
| 17 - <u>Microtus</u> sp. | Meadow Mouse |
| 5 - <u>Peromyscus</u> sp. | White-footed Mouse. |
| 2 - <u>Blarina</u> sp. | Short-tailed Shrew |
| 3 - <u>Cryptotis parva</u> | Small Short-tailed Shrew. |

PELLETS OF SHORT-EARED OWL.



- 1 - 60 x 24 mm.
- 2 - 40 x 32 mm.
- 3 - 37 x 28 mm.
- 4 - 38 x 22 mm.
- 5 - 35 x 23 mm.
- 6 - 44 x 20 mm.
- 7 - 52 x 20 mm.
- 8 - 47 x 22 mm.
- 9 - 45 x 21 mm.
- 10 - 45 x 26 mm.
- 11 - 55 x 21 mm.
- 12 - 36 x 21 mm.
- 13 - 55 x 21 mm.

Average Pellett

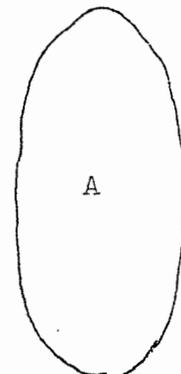
"A"

45 x 22 mm.

Drawings

xl

J L P



Birds (13.8 percent of items found)

- 1 - Sturnella magna. Meadowlark.
- 1 - Sturnus vulgaris. Starling.
- 2 - Agelaius phoeniceus. Redwing.
- 1 - Buteo borealis. Red-tailed Hawk.

Crustaceans (0.8 percent of items found)

- 3 - Cambarus? Crayfish.

Totals: Mammals, 28; Birds, 5; Crustaceans, 3.

It seems very doubtful to me that the Red-tailed Hawk, listed above, could have been prey to one of these small owls. However, several feathers, a tongue, hyoid apparatus, and a leg were found directly under one of the perches. Everything else listed was found in pellet formations and most certainly had been eaten by an owl.

Mr. L. Wayne Wilson, of Moorefield, determined the genera of the mammalian skulls found, and this paper represents more of his work than mine. Only skulls were used and, therefore, each mammal listed above is represented by an actual skull found within the pellets, the only exception to those being the record of a Muskrat. The one bone of a Muskrat found was the tibio-fibia and this was carefully checked with the corresponding bone of a prepared Muskrat skeleton.

Mr. Wilson placed three of the skulls in the genus Cryptotis and, after looking through records available, found that only two of these Shrews had been taken in West Virginia -- both by Surber in Greenbrier County in 1897. For this reason, the skulls were sent to the U. S. Biological Survey and were there identified specifically as C. parva.

Measurements of the pellets were taken and outlines of their shapes were made, as noted in the accompanying figure and table.

--- Department of Botany & Zoology
West Virginia University
Morgantown, W. Va.

GENERAL NOTES

Nature Reunion Plans:-- Plans for the annual nature reunion to be held in Wheeling October 5-6, 1940, are described in detail in bulletins being sent to all members of the Brooks Bird Club, inasmuch as the reunion incorporates a reunion of those who participated in the Club's 1940 summer Foray. All members of the Club are invited to attend. An outdoors photographic exhibit, showing of colored slides of the 1940 Foray, a dinner featuring the traditional "opry", an informal dance and party, a business meeting and field trips are to be included in a busy week-end.

Harold Olsen, President of the old Nature School Alumni Association and Charles L. Conrad, acting president of the Bird Club are in general charge, with Olsen as chairman of the committee. Address registrations and inquiries to 113 Edgewood St. Wheeling, W. Va.

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE BROOKS BIRD CLUB

September 27th is the date of the 1940 annual meeting of The Brooks Bird Club which is to be held at the Club Room at the West residence, 113 Edgewood St., Wheeling, W. Va., starting at eight o'clock P. M. Active Members, who alone of members of the Club are entitled to vote in Club affairs are particularly urged to attend as are Corresponding Members resident within easy motoring distance of Wheeling. Visitors are welcome.

Adoption of a proposed new set of by-laws for the organization and the annual election of officers and executive committeemen constitute major items for discussion and action by the organization. In addition, following the election, there will be an open discussion of the 1940-41 program of the Club, an item of considerable importance and involving ambitious plans already tentatively suggested by various members of the organization.

An informal social hour will follow the meeting with refreshments on a "Dutch treat" basis.

FIELD NOTES

Cooper's Hawks "Playing?":-- On two occasions the writer has seen Cooper's Hawks, Accipiter cooperi, apparently engaged in "playing" with large flocks of Starlings, and apparently making no effort to take any members of the alarmed flocks. On these occasions, individual Hawks swooped down through hastily opened breaks in the solid flying ranks of the smaller birds, rebounded above the Starlings and occasionally circled the closely-packed flocks. The performance was quite unlike the low-flying, fiery dash of these formidable hawks when taking avian prey.

On June 19, 1940, Mrs. Handlan and I were in the forest fire observation tower in Lost River State Park, Hardy County, West Virginia, just reaching the shelter of the glass-enclosed tower when a mountain rainstorm began. From our vantage point, 80 feet above the mountain top which is, at this location, 3,200 feet above sea level, we watched the speedy travel of the storm, borne on a high wind. This same wind was shaking the tower noticeably.

As the rain slackened we noted a number of Turkey Vultures, Cathartes aura, riding the wind which continued to sweep across the mountain top. Near the Vultures were two smaller birds, obviously hawks, which seemed to have far more difficulty in facing the wind and maintaining their positions than did the Vultures.

As we watched, the two smaller birds swooped toward the tower and began flying in circles about it -- at times within 50 feet of where we stood with binoculars trained upon them. They were Cooper's Hawks, the smaller of the two more brightly colored and presumably a male, the larger presumably a female.

For at least five minutes, the birds circled and swooped about the tower. First one and then the other assumed the lead. Often one rose above the other and stooped sharply toward the ground, to rebound on stiff pinions and again resume the circling of the tower. The performance occurred when, assuming the birds to have been a mated pair, young should be well advanced in growth, if not actually long since from the nest. Possibly the performance was a carry-over of earlier courtship activities. It gave every evidence of being sheer "play".

---John W. Handlan
91 Lynwood Ave.,
Wheeling, W. Va.

Late Fall Date for the Hooded Warbler:-- During the early afternoon of November 9, 1939, while the writer was engaged in hunting birds in a thicket along a stream, a female Hooded Warbler, Wilsonia citrina, was observed. By "squeaking" on the back of my hand, many common birds had been attracted and were in the bushes nearby when the loud "cheeps" of a Hooded Warbler were heard. The bird flew to a low branch of a bush about 30 feet away where a perfect view of it was obtained in the sunlight. It moved back into the thicket but more "squeaking" brought it to view again, on another low branch, before it disappeared downstream where all later attempts to attract the bird proved to be in vain.

---William C. Legg
Mount Lookout
Nicholas County, W. Va.

"BIRDS OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA"
A Book Review

Todd, W. E. Clyde, "Birds of Western Pennsylvania," 1940, (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa.) \$5.00.

Some ten years ago we acquired our first state or regional ornithological monograph "Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States," by E. H. Forbush, completed by Dr. John B. May. We read every word of this three-volume work and since then have referred to it time after time. Numerous other state or regional works since then have become part of a modest ornithological library, ranging from Taverner's "Birds of Canada" to Murphy's "Oceanic Birds of South America."

Valuable as these and many others are, none of them came "close to home" and it was with especial interest that we awaited publication of "Birds of Western Pennsylvania" by Mr. W. E. Clyde Todd, Curator of Ornithology for the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, Pa. We had long since read sample proof pages of this work and had helped to arrange two exhibits of the originals of the water-colors by Dr. George M. Sutton which were to illustrate it. Furthermore, we had the pleasure of Mr. Todd's acquaintance and that of a number of others whom, we knew, were assisting in the completion of his work -- culmination of a half-century of study of the birds of the region with which he proposed to deal.

In short, we were prepared to give "Birds of Western Pennsylvania" our editorial blessing even before it appeared. Publication of the book, made possible by a gift from the Buhl Foundation and the cooperation of the University of Pittsburgh Press, occurred in early summer of 1940. And, as anyone who knows the author and his aides might have expected, "Birds of Western Pennsylvania" needs no bolstering by friendship or regional interest in its demand for favorable review.

Even an amateur ornithologist cannot but be impressed by Mr. Todd's evident scientific accuracy -- a bird-in-hand exactitude with demand for insistence upon time and place of collection, the prevailing strong tendency to deal sparingly with "sight records" and to view with suspicion the few dubious sight records admitted to the text. Yet the author's meticulous insistence upon this side of the book's contents has not prevented his keeping well in mind the fact that numerous amateurs and laymen will read and use his volume. Consequently, descriptions are generally non-technical in character and under "Habits" he and a few collaborators have found ample scope for entertaining, as well as informative, reading.

The author has confined his work within some 700-odd pages, including indices, a lengthy bibliography, etc. as well as the text proper. In other words, he found it necessary to cut his material to its essentials, with small space available for any but straight-forward, matter of fact writing. There is a tendency, fortunately rare among ornithologists to affect so-called modern "short cuts" in literary composition -- to depart from rules of grammar and composition with which most of us were imbued with more or less permanency in our graded school days. It is a relief to note that Mr. Todd disdains all such transgressions against good English.

This reviewer is not competent to pass upon the technicalities involved in Mr. Todd's acceptance or rejection of ornithological races. For example, in discussing the Ruffed Grouse, he declines to follow Dr. Wetmore (1) in referring Ruffed Grouse of the Appalachian highlands to Bonasa umbellus togata, but refers Pennsylvania specimens to B. u. umbellus, the Eastern Ruffed Grouse. He notes certain specimens of the Pennsylvania birds, however, showing an "approach" to togata, the Northern race of the species. (2).

In and between the lines of the text are expressed, or implied, ecological material of especial interest to laymen. For example, he notes that the Eastern Turkey has disappeared from a certain Pennsylvania ridge where Deer have destroyed Laurel and Rhododendron cover -- sustaining technical and lay views that the presence of an over-abundance of any species (deer in this instance) works to the detriment of others and supporting the view of many naturalists and hunters that Pennsylvania's deer herds constitute a problem for hunters of smaller game as well as a nuisance to agriculture in parts of that State.

Under Mr. Todd's account of the Hawks and Owls, he expresses very well an eminently sensible viewpoint upon natural predation upon game birds and others -- particularly the former group -- by Hawks and Owls. He notes, too, the diminished numbers of so-called predatory birds brought about by indiscriminate destruction by gunners cloaked in the self-woven mantles of "protectors" of game birds and mammals.

Occasionally in the text, Mr. Todd states a viewpoint which seems to West Virginia observers to be not quite correct. Typical is this:

"But in the western counties, a curious state of affairs exists in the Ohio Valley. Although this is the very region where one would naturally expect to see the Crow in winter, the species deserts this section during the coldest part of the year and is as regularly migratory as the Robin. It is a mystery to me that some observers contrive to include the Crow in their 'Christmas Census' list from Beaver County, for in the course of a long experience there, I have detected it but once along the Ohio River in December, and only once in January."

Crow flights, to and from roosting places which may be on either side of the Ohio River are common, daily occurrences in fall and throughout the winter in counties the length of the West Virginia Panhandle and directly along the Ohio River. Hancock County, West Virginia, bordered by Beaver County, Pennsylvania on the east is but two miles wide in places and nowhere is much greater in width, yet Crows are common winter residents there -- gathering in great numbers on occasion, as they do in Brooke and Ohio Counties, West Virginia. Christmas Census makers in western Beaver County, at least, should have no trouble whatsoever in finding this species for their Christmas lists.

Of especial interest to members of The Brooks Bird Club are Mr. Todd's discussions of the birds, particularly the waterfowl and shorebirds of the Pymatuning-Erie territory, annual goal of Club field trips for the past several years. An astonishingly large number of species now are listed as breeding birds for the

Pymatuning Lake game refuge and occasional spectacular surprises, such as the presence and taking there of the Great White Heron are recorded.

This reviewer, together with many others of the Greater Wheeling district, has been privileged to view originals of Dr. George M. Sutton's water-colors from which 22 full-page plates have been reproduced in color to illustrate this work. One hundred and eighteen species are represented. In a number of instances, to these inexpert eyes, the reproductions are not particularly well done. The depth of the "blue" employed in the reproduction of portraits of such species as the Flycatchers seems to us to have been far too great, at the sacrifice of green tones. Certainly, such a fault was not apparent in the originals nor, we understand, in color proofs approved by artist and author before the book went to press.

"Birds of Western Pennsylvania" is a "must" requirement for the book shelves of anyone interested in birds of this general area. Particularly is this so from the standpoint of bird students of eastern Ohio and of West Virginia who lack similar books upon the bird life of their respective territories. Mr. Todd's book gives full recognition to those who have assisted him in its compilation and composition, notably to Miss Ruth Trimble, assistant in his department at the Carnegie Museum and who actually is author of more than a score of the divisions under "Habits" for as many species of western Pennsylvania birds.

The work is beautifully and adequately bound with care taken to avoid the too-light covers which probably will shorten the useful life of certain other heavy ornithological works of recent publication. The general format is attractive and eminently readable for a public long accustomed to general ease of reading type-columns of newspaper style -- in itself a departure from the format of similar texts. We like very much the title type and body type employed in this work.

Mr. Todd may well be proud of this enduring monument to a life-time of ornithological service, as may those who assisted him in however small a capacity.

- (1) Wetmore, Alexander, "Observations on the Birds of West Virginia."
Proceedings U. S. National Museum, Aug. 24, 1937
84, 401-441.
- (2) Todd, W. E. Clyde, "Eastern Races of the Ruffed Grouse. Auk, July 1940
57, 390-397.

---John W. Handlan
91 Lynwood Ave.,
Wheeling, W. Va.

THE REDSTART is published monthly by and for the members of The Brooks Bird Club. Corresponding Membership may be obtained upon payment of \$1.00 which includes a twelve-month subscription to THE REDSTART. Members are invited to send in for publication, pertinent field notes. These are subject to editing to insure the greatest possible accuracy. Memberships, field notes and correspondence should be addressed to The Brooks Bird Club, 113 Edgewood St., Wheeling, W. Va.