

Western Tanager



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WHAT CONTROLS THE MILITARY MANEUVERS OF BIRD FLOCKS?

Excerpts from a Letter from Mr. Josiah Keely, Member of L.A.A.S., Huntington, N. Y.

I have been writing to some of our bird friends in California of a phenomenon I once witnessed among chimney swifts (related to the Vaux swifts of the West), and which I have been investigating by correspondence with banders and ornithologists. Some of our members may be interested.

About twenty years ago the Biological Survey was engaged in the banding of great numbers of swifts in order to locate their winter home. I assisted I. H. Johnston, then state ornithologist of West Virginia, in banding a great flock of over 2000 which had been occupying a church chimney in Charleston, W. Va., during the fall migration. The birds were directed, as they left the chimney, down a tin chute and collected in crates made of a netting over light wood framework. When we started to put on the bands we had twelve crates, averaging about 200 swifts to the crate, all of which were in sight. They were exceptionally passive and did not struggle very vigorously even when taken in the hand. There was little movement in the crates.

After banding and releasing quite a number, we came to one which uttered a shrill "squeal," quite unlike their usual twitter. This was rather startling, but not as much so as the reaction of the passive birds in the crates: They set up an instantaneous fluttering, all in unison; not dashing about, nor changing positions, but shaking their wings in a tremulous flutter, something like a young bird being fed. As we continued to band, we soon came to another "squealer" and the response from the crates was repeated in the same way as before. We became interested and counted the swifts that "sounded off" when taken in the hand, and examined them more closely. All seemed somewhat stronger and with stouter legs, as if they were tough old males. We knew there were stragglers still in the chimney which we were unable to flush, and wondered if a "squealer" held over the chimney would dislodge them. They came to the top immediately. In all there were about 100 "squealers," so, a hundred times, the birds in the crates, though their numbers were decreasing all the time, answered the same signal with a flutter.

Last summer I came in contact with Geoffrey Gill, the editor of EBBA, organ of the Eastern Bird Banding Association. When I told him of this experience, I was surprised to learn he had never heard of it. As my experience lacked corroboration, I felt embarrassed and asked for the names of some of the big swift banders of the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee. I got an immediate answer from Raymond Fleetwood, of Georgia, who had banded 42,000 swifts and whose bands had located the swifts' winter habitat in South America, about four years ago. He confirmed my experience in every particular and said he was now making a separate record of "squealers" (he himself had so named them), to see if they were specialized individuals and always "sounded off." I will not go into all the answers I got, but they were practically unanimous in their confirmations, and most of them made some speculations as to the significance. For example, one thought the squeal might be a developed characteristic for the purpose of preventing smothering when too many tried to crowd into confined spaces.

What I have been "fishing" for is some evidence that birds that fly in close formation, and make precise evolutions in unison, are directed by some other means

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OBSERVATIONS: According to reports from all areas this spring, the warbler migration has been far below par in number of species individuals. All species have been reported, but only one to two or three of each observed in areas where in former years the usual flight-lane trees and shrubs fairly bubbled with their numbers. House wrens, however, are common in all their usual habitats. Blue grosbeaks are back in their several nesting sites, as well as lazuli buntings and black-chinned sparrows. The phainopeplas are again starting nesting in their Glendale foothill area. Will observers please note and report on the apparent diminishing numbers of Brewer blackbirds? LISTEN NOW FOR: The songs of the birds as they go about their busy family-life activities and note how many cares and problems they overcome and still keep on singing!

. . . Caroline H. Daugherty

NEW MEMBERS, WELCOME!

- Mr. Charles C. Ayres, Jr. Langdale Bldg., Ottumwa, Iowa. Mr. Avery M. Blount 11608 Kagel Canyon St., R.D. San Fernando. Mr. E. W. Boerstler P.O. Box 494, Corona del Mar Mr. John C. Ceurvorst 1130 Sanborn Ave., Los Angeles 27 Mr. C. V. Cipes 1011 Durfee Ave., Pico Miss Bernice R. Green 774 N. Heliotrope Dr., Los Angeles 27 Miss Judith Norvell Jamison 620 S. Breed St., Los Angeles 23 Jerry Ringer 6441 Maryland Dr., Los Angeles 36 Mr. Earl Russell & Justin Russell 2046 W. 71st St., Los Angeles 44 Mrs. Nona E. Sengebush 485 E. 56th St., Long Beach 5

SPECIAL GREETINGS to our newest out-of-state member, Mr. Charles C. Ayres, Jr., of Ottumwa, Iowa. Mr. Ayres visited Los Angeles last winter, attended several of our meetings and went on a number of personally conducted field trips. It seems to have been as pleasant an experience for him as for his hosts. He is president of the Ottumwa Bird Club, and was recently elected president of the Iowa Ornithological Union.

FIELD TRIP, Thursday, June 6. Fern Dell, at the Western Avenue entrance to Griffith Park. Meet at entrance to Dell, just off Los Feliz Blvd. at 9:30 A.M. Leader Mrs. Daugherty. Take lunch and at 11:30 return to picnic tables in Sect. 1, South. After lunch the officers for 1946-47 will be installed by Mrs. Harriet Williams Myers, a founder of the Society in 1910 and for many years its guiding spirit. The new officers are: President, Mrs. J. H. Comby First Vice-Pres., . Mrs. Mary V. Hood Second Vice-Pres. . Mrs. H. E. Eckler Recording Secy., . Mrs. Neil H. Lewis Executive Secy. . Miss Ida M. Wilson Treasurer, Mrs. C. J. Parker Curator-Librarian, Mrs. M. B. Salmon Historian, . . . Miss Helen E. Vieths

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A WORD FROM OUR PRESIDENT -

It was a particularly happy experience to renew acquaintance with forests and mountains this last week-end. As we viewed again the spectacular beauty of Kings River Canyon with its rushing water and statuesque peaks; as we stood beneath Sequoias hoary with age, while deer browsed tranquilly in the meadows and joyous bird songs winned into the air, - we felt with John Muir that these were glad tidings and here indeed was the peace that Nature offers so freely. As one comes again upon these beloved scenes after an absence of several years the steadfastness of Nature is apparent and it is cheering to know, in the confusion of the world today, that it is these things that will endure. "Spend as much time as you can with body and spirit in God's out-of-doors; this is one of the little guide-posts on the foot-path of peace." (Vandyke.)

---- ERNA COMBY

("Military Maneuvers." Cont'd from front page.) than keeping eyes glued upon a leader, or conforming to the movements of birds next in position. I know that swarms of bees are said to follow the peculiar hum of the queen's wings. For one thing, a leader cannot be kept in sight continually on account of intervening bodies of other birds; and a dependence on doing the same as the one next in position would cause a lag in the movement; whereas, waxwings, swifts, sanderlings, etc. seem to wheel and change direction almost as if "tied together."

If response to a sound becomes so automatic as to become functional, I am wondering if a leader of a flock darted to a new position and at the same time gave a directing note, the preciseness of the evolution would not be nearer what we observe than a "follow the leader" technique . . . Is there anyone else in the Society who may wish to watch the military maneuvers of bird flocks for indications of control by sound signals?

A NEW SANCTUARY. Those of our members who were able to accept the invitation of Mr. and Mrs. Neil V. Bullion to visit their Bar V Ranch school for boys, near Nuevo, had a happy day there April 30th. The demonstration field trip, study class and program requested of us brought out, above everything else, the fact that the boys themselves had had excellent training in Nature study. Their intelligent interest and courteous attention gave distinct pleasure. The program of the day reached a climax with the formal dedication of the ranch as a wildlife sanctuary, our president, Mrs. Comby, officiating. Our sincere appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. Bullion and their staff.

A TIMELY SUGGESTION. The two study helps designed by our Committee on Youth Leadership for its work among young people may well be used by adult members as a test of their own knowledge. The "Study Guide," for recording one's observations, is illustrated with 25 outline drawings which may be colored, if the student wishes. Whether or not the result is a work of art, the effort involved will surely bring about a better understanding of the bird's color pattern. The "Study List" of common birds of Los Angeles County, by habitat, really should be regarded as a minimum requirement for every member of an Audubon Society. Let every member of our Society purchase at least one of each of these two study helps. (Price, 52 cents for the two, plus two cents tax.) Call the Executive Secretary, Normandy 1-4279, for desired information.

AUDUBON MAGAZINE (March-April, 1946, Sec. 2) reports that in a total of 288 Christmas bird counts printed this year, the longest list was the 136 obtained at Los Angeles, Charleston, S.C., with a total of 131 species and sub-species, came second.

"HELP US TO GROW in strength as well as in numbers; to grow in dignity as well as in popularity; to be cordial to the stranger, to be kind to the old-timer, to be just to the co-worker. Help us to reflect credit on the parent association, the National Audubon Society, the greatest power for bird protection in the world and one of the greatest influences for conservation of our natural resources. Help us to keep united as a society and to move forward."

-- From an address by Mrs. F. T. Bicknell, former President, L.A.A.S.

THE NATURE TRAINING COURSE FOR YOUTH LEADERS

By William K. DePue, Member, Los Angeles Audubon Society and Publicity
Chairman, Northwest District, Los Angeles Area, Boy Scouts of America

The Nature Training Course announced in "The Western Tanager," February, 1946, began February 19 at the Los Angeles County Museum and continued through March 25. It was conducted by Mrs. Mary V. Hood, with the assistance of some twenty members of the Los Angeles Audubon Society, as an activity of the society's Committee on Youth Leadership, Mrs. O. B. Pratt, chairman, and was sponsored by the Southern California Camping Association.

All who were connected in any way with this course have a right to feel elated, because this was a job well done. There is no richer field than is provided by Nature, and this course really approached Nature with interesting, practical talks, beautiful pictures and adequate exhibits. Only those who attended can possibly know how smoothly and effectively the work was carried on. Few will, or can, realize the tremendous and wide-spread ultimate good which will accrue to youth from this undertaking. Mere statistics fail to tell the full story.

Eager willingness to cooperate was evidenced throughout. This spirit, carried into action, accounts for the results attained. Space prohibits mentioning each individual and organization whose suggestions and helpfulness were so valuable; however, a major portion of any credit must be extended to Mrs. Hood, because of her untiring effort, her knowledge of the subject and her ability to organize personnel, materials and innumerable necessary details.

Subjects covered, with emphasis on local species and conditions: Life zones, habitat, animals, birds and bird calls, reptiles, shrubs and conifers, handicraft in the field, problems in conservation and "Do's and Don'ts" for a field leader. Protective use of camouflage in Nature was pointed out.

Fourteen meetings were held, - a two-hour illustrated lecture and exhibit study period, with open discussion, on each Tuesday and Thursday evening for six weeks, and two field trips on Sundays. Tuesday's and Thursday's work was identical each week so that one could attend either, to avoid conflict with other activities. A third field trip, postponed due to weather conditions, will be held later.

More than 400 individuals took all or part of the course - practically half of these were representatives of the Boy Scouts. Average attendance, above 100, was near capacity for available facilities. Sixty-seven persons attended the six indoor meetings and both outdoor meetings. Fifty-six others missed but one session. All were enthusiastic and complimentary; even those who attended but one meeting were inspired and benefited. Some few attended all fourteen sessions.

Neighborhood centers within a 25-mile radius were well represented; some came from greater distances. Over-all adult representation from youth organizations, schools and churches was attained. There were junior leaders from youth activities; parents interested in helping their own children, and individuals who attended for personal benefit.

Conclusion: The one outstanding feature is the need and practicability of this type of training. It is appalling how few youth leaders have any real knowledge of Nature. How can the blind lead the blind? If we are to capture and hold the interest of youth in this age of so many unworthy attractions, we must present worth-while material with a "know-how." One good turn deserves another. We should immediately plan further activity of this kind. Each of us should seek diligently to serve in some capacity according to individual ability.

NOTICE

This is the last issue of "The Western Tanager" for the current club year. The Committee on Publications thanks all those who have contributed to its pages and asks for the same helpful cooperation for the coming year, beginning next fall. Meanwhile, help us to keep the mailing list in perfect condition by notifying us of any change in address, and above all by paying your dues for 1946-7 promptly.