

Volume 5, No. 2

Fall 2001

Autumn Bird Banding at Carver's Gap by Rick Knight

Each fall, as millions of birds are migrating southward, bird banders erect mist nets to capture a small sample of the flight. Birds are identified to species, banded, measured, and have their age (adult or immature) and sex determined. Then they are released. The numbers and species composition of birds captured at a banding station may be useful in gauging the population trends of migratory species. The age ratio of a sample may give an indication of relative breeding success for some species. Other life history details may be learned through this process, as well.

I have operated a small banding station at Carver's Gap, on Roan Mountain, for three of the last five autumns. This site was selected because of the large numbers of migrants observed moving through. The station has been opened from mid August until mid October, the peak of songbird migration. Nets are set up from dawn to mid-day. Nearly 1600 birds of 58 species have been banded during the three seasons of operation. Most of these have been Neo-tropical migrants, but some short-distance migrants and resident species have been caught, too.

Warblers and thrushes make up the bulk of the catch. Thus far, 23 species of warblers have been banded, with the most frequent being Tennessee and Black-throated Blue warblers. Uncommon warblers have included Golden-winged, Mourning, and Wilson's. Swainson's Thrush has been the most common member of that family. Juncos, an abundant resident, are also caught in substantial numbers. The recovery rate for songbirds is considerably less than 1%. So far, none of "my" birds have been encountered elsewhere, but I keep hoping. I have re-captured juncos banded here in previous years.

I thank the Cherokee and Pisgah National Forests for permission to band birds at Carver's Gap.



As a licensed bander, Rick has captured, banded, and released nearly 10 thousand birds. He authored the book, The Birds of Northeast Tennessee, and numerous articles on birds of the region. Rick will be our speaker on Friday evening at upcoming Fall Naturalists' Rally.



Discoveries: A Writer Rediscovered What's Important at Roan Mountain Workshop

In March I drove from Roanoke, Virginia, to Roan Mountain, Tennessee, to meet a writer I only knew through words and an out-of-date picture. Elizabeth Hunter, who has contributed a column to our magazine for years from her mountain home in North Carolina, was in my mind a little bit of a myth, this independent, dog-owning woman who grows vegetables and tends butterflies and then writes like Annie Dillard about them.

Elizabeth was teaching a writing workshop at Roan Mountain State Park, and I signed up. I left on a Friday, at the end of a typical week of deadlines, multi-tasking and not enough sleep.

I got my first lesson on the road, when I called Elizabeth from my cell phone. "Are you *driving*?" she asked me, obviously, and rightfully, disapproving. After I hung up, I thought, why do I have to always do at least two things at once?

The good thing is, the mountains slow us down. The next morning I joined a group of naturalists, writers, hikers, country dwellers, a midwife, a park ranger. We talked about writing, then we went into the woods and wandered along a late winter corridor of rhododendron.

There's an essay in every moment, I found, as we wandered the trail. An old family cemetery whose vaults rise out of the grass - a half-eaten acorn left by some squirrel on the shelf left by a broken tree branch - tree bark grown around old barbed wire until the trunk looks like a woman's body - a newt moving sluggishly through cold muddy water reminds me of something in a dream.

Different things caught different people's attention. Every so often, we found Elizabeth crouched over the ground, peering at something half-buried in leaves, calling out, "I need a plant person!" The nearest "plant person" would hurry over and name the leaf, the stem, the root, with an obvious sense of joy - and kinship.

I learned lessons from those around me. I found that any time I asked park ranger Jennifer Laughlin a question, or any time she noticed something, she stopped, stood still, talked about it thoughtfully. I had to fight my urge to keep moving, keep walking, trying to multi-task again.

Back in the classroom, Elizabeth asked us to write down the sensory details we remember from the walk. We wondered and laughed at our observations.

We had listed the sound of birdflight, the feel of moss, the

brilliance of orchids. One woman has written she found an "absence of sound." The birder in the group, on the other hand, had written down five different bird calls. "What interests me," said the birder, "is you gave us all the same instructions and all I wrote down was species."

"Knowing what things are is a certain kind of baggage," Elizabeth told us. "Not knowing what things are is another kind of baggage."

I'm not sure which kind of baggage I'd like to carry. I'm not sure I need to know the Latin names of bird species. There is, as many watchers of stars have noted, a romance in *not* knowing.

Some things I *would* like to know, and I think I returned to Roanoke at the end of the weekend with some of that knowledge - that the mountains are there, that they are quiet and eternal, and that a simple walk in the woods is sometimes all we need to remind us that life need not be frantic, and multi-tasking is overrated.

Cara Ellen Modisett lives in Roanoke, Virginia, where she is Associate Editor with Blue Ridge Country magazine. Elizabeth Hunter will be offering a writing workshop at the Fall Rally on Sunday afternoon.



Iron Mining in Carter County
Jennifer Laughlin and Anne Whittemore are looking for information (newspaper articles, books, diaries) and pictures (photos, drawings) about iron mining in Carter County specifically in the vicinity of the town of Roan Mountain to the North Carolina line. Information is available on the Cranberry Mine at the town of Cranberry, but very little is available about the Wilder Mine and the "Pegleg" Mine. The town of Roan Mountain was formerly "The Crab Orchard" and at that time a forge built by Wilder was located there. Remnants of the RR bed which brought ore from the Pegleg Mine to the forge are still evidenced along the road to the park from the present village. Call 423-477-2235 for further information. Thank you.



New Caving Trip for Fall Rally

This year adventurous souls will have the opportunity to visit one of the longest caves in Eastern Tennessee, Morrill's (A.K.A. Worley) Cave, near Bluff City. The entrance to the cave sets in a large sink about 3 to 4 acres in size. The cave runs southwest for about a mile and a half there are numerous beautiful formations and many huge rooms which makes Morrill cave one of the nicest caves in Tennessee. The trip will be led by members of Mountain Empire Grotto. This will be an all-day event. Participants will meet at the park at 8:30 a.m. and car pool to the cave site. The cave owners charge \$5.00 per person.

This moderately rated trip will be mostly walking, but some crawling will be involved. This is definitely a novice caving trip, so if you have ever had an interest, now is the time to try! The

cave is 55°F year round. You will need to wear boots or shoes with tread and appropriate clothes (something that can get MUDDY). Which means you'll probably want to bring along some clothes for changing into when you come out. Pack a lunch and bring drinking water. Helmets and lights will be provided, however you must bring 4 AA alkaline batteries for the light.

The following information is taken from "Introduction to Caving" by Paul M. Gaskins, a member of the Mountain Empire Grotto.

The Cave Environment

Caves occur in many forms all over the world. Solutional limestone caves are the type found in this part of the country (Northeast Tennessee). These are cavities formed primarily by slow moving ground water passing through a limestone substrate. As the water table drops, these voids become air filled and it is at this time that breakdown and deposition (formations) occur.

Cave temperature generally reflects the average temperature for the region. Here, you can expect the cave to be approximately 56 degrees year round with one-hundred percent relative humidity. Caves also generally contain water in some form or another such as drip pools or streams. This usually means that the cave explorer will encounter mud, sometimes in vast quantities. Cave mud can have a high clay content that will stain clothing and shoes.

Passages in wild (non-commercial) caves are extremely varied. Common to most caves in the area are a combination of pits, rocks, large blocks, sand, mud and fissures. Vertical development is quite common which means rope work of some sort is required for exploration. For novice trips we, of course, choose caves that contain easy passage with as few climbing or vertical hazards as possible. At the most, we might guide the group through an area that requires a handline to assist over a small vertical obstacle to act as an introduction to such techniques.

Limestone caves are often decorated with speleothems. These can be any of a variety of secondary calcite deposition formations such as stalagmites, stalactites, splatterstone, flowstone, rimstone dams, helictites, and soda straws. In addition to calcite deposition, there also occurs many other types of mineral formations such as aragonite bushes, gypsum flowers and dogtooth spar. All of these items take thousands of years to form and are very delicate. Care must be taken to prevent breakage. Even something such as a carelessly placed hand may put mud on a white calcite formation that will never wash off (remember, it doesn't rain in caves).

There are many living creatures that may be encountered in a cave, but most are quite small and delicate. Because of the cool temperatures and dark environment, mammals and reptiles are rarely

encountered beyond the entrance zone. The only mammal that may be found in large numbers in local caves is the bat. There are several species of bat found in this region such as the Eastern Pipistrelle, Small Brown, Large Brown, Grays, and Virginia Long-ear. Many myths surround these creatures, but in truth, they are timid, beneficial animals that pose absolutely no threat to humans. Other fauna commonly found in caves are various insects, spiders, salamanders and crayfish. Small aquatic creatures can be found if one looks closely in pools and streams such as various species of isopods and amphipods (these are usually approximately ¼ to ½ inch long). All of these animals cling precariously to life in a fragile environment and care must be taken while walking through their home.

We should always follow the NSS motto:

*Take nothing but pictures,
Leave nothing but footprints.
Kill nothing but time.*

Clothing/Gear

Experienced cavers can end up spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars on equipment such as climbing gear, ropes, packs, bolting equipment, etc. Obviously, people entering a cave for the first time on a guided tour need only minimal gear. The recommendations for basic clothing and equipment are as follows:

Insulating layer – This is the inner layer of clothing that will keep you warm. Polypropylene or wool long johns are excellent. Cotton is undesirable.

Outer-wear layer – This is the outer layer of clothing that will protect the caver from the rough surfaces of the cave and from mud and dirt. Coveralls are a common choice. Any light tough jacket will do. Cotton is okay here, but synthetic fibers are better. Remember, any apparel worn into a cave will not come out the same. Tears and abrasion damage are almost certain and mud will stain almost any fabric permanently.

Gloves – Leather gloves are important to protect the hands. Cheap gardening gloves will work fine.

Helmet – Helmets are a must! Mountain Empire Grotto has a cache of helmets that will be loaned out to participants in the novice trip as required. Anyone who has their own helmet is encouraged to bring it, but it will be subject to approval by the trip guide. Helmets should have some type of chin strap system (preferably with a four point attachment).

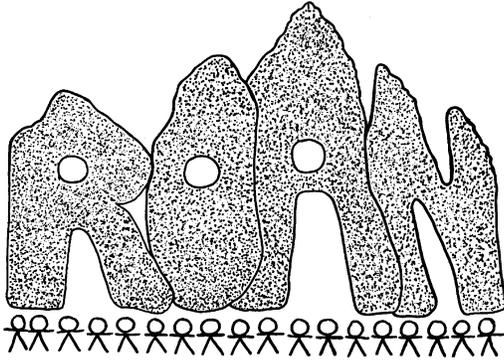
Lights – Helmet mounted lighting systems are another must. Hand held flashlights are undesirable since they limit the use of the hands, although a backup flashlight in your backpack is a good idea. Cavers generally carry at least three sources of light that can be helmet mounted. This redundancy becomes crucial as trips push longer and deeper into cave systems. Novice trip participants will not be required to have three lights. Mountain Empire Grotto has a cache of lights that will be loaned out to participants as required. **It is only necessary for each person to bring four AA batteries as backups for the lights.**

Boots – Tough ankle high boots with lug soles are the best choice for any caving activity. Tennis shoes or sneakers are not desirable since they provide no ankle support and poor traction on muddy surfaces. We understand that not everyone has such boots available nor wish to run out and buy them. However, be aware of the increased risk of falls if improper footwear is worn. Also, be aware that any shoes worn into a cave will not come out the same. Damage or staining is almost certain.

Knee pads and elbow pads – On almost any cave trip some crawling will be done. There are many pad systems, but simple sport knee pads work fine. Knee pads are worn almost always while elbow pads are used somewhat less.

Water (OPTIONAL) – Some sort of water bottle or canteen is a good idea. Most cavers carry plastic pop bottles in their packs. These are cheap and easily replaced when worn out.

Packs (OPTIONAL) – Small sturdy backpacks or buttpacks are used to carry such things as handline (rope), medical supplies, water, backup lights, batteries, food, large garbage bags (for emergency use), and other items.



Graphic: J.C. Mills and Becky Kiehna

State Park Happenings

Though summer is slowly waning away and school is about to start, activities at the park are far from over! We have had a great summer with wonderful guest entertainers sharing with us their music and talents. Following is a schedule for the rest of the 2001 season at Roan Mountain State Park:

Sat. Aug. 11:

12 - 4 pm at the Conference Center
Felting Workshop with Jo Ann Cordell & Melanie Koenig. Registration: \$25.00 - Limit 15

Sat., Aug. 11: Summer Concerts: Park Amphitheater

7 pm - Moody & Miller and the Elk River Boys
8 pm - Rhododendron Cloggers

Sat., Aug. 18: Miller Homestead

1 - 2 pm - Bruce Moody Band

Sat., Aug. 18: Park Amphitheater

7 pm - AM Bluegrass
8 pm - Stoney Creek Cloggers

Sat., Sept. 1: Miller Homestead:

1 - 2 pm - Bagpipers; Jon Shell & Friends

Sat., Sept 1: Traditional Arts Workshop:

12 - 4 pm Natural Dying with instructors, Ellie Hjemmet and Jo Ann Cordell
Registration: \$15.00 Limit 15

Sat., Sept 1: Summer Concerts: Park Amphitheater:

7 pm Rhododendron Cloggers
8 pm Patchwork
9 pm Campers Night Lights Contest Awards

(Check out the campground tonight as campers decorate their campers with an original and creative light display, competing for great prizes which include free cabin and campground rentals)

Friday - Sunday, Sept. 7 - 9:

39th Annual Fall Naturalists' Rally

Sat. & Sun, Sept. 15 & 16:

21st Annual Fall Festival

Sat., Sept. 29 12 -4 pm at the Conference Center

Traditional Arts Workshop: Beading (Rosette Technique) with instructor, Jo Ann Cordell

Registration: \$25.00 Limit: 15 participants

Sat., Oct. 13:

1 - 5 pm at the Conference Center

Traditional Arts Workshop: Weaving

Instructors, Ellie Hjemmet & Jo Ann Cordell

Registration: \$25.00 (plus \$20.00 if you wish to buy Inkel loom) Limit: 15

Sat., October 13

Traditional Arts Workshop: Primitive Pottery, Handbuilding (Part I)

10 am - 4 pm at the Miller Homestead

Instructors: Chris Edens, Clark Sams, Bobby Estep.

Registration Fee: not yet determined. Limit: 12

Sat., October 20

3 - 7 pm - Haunted Halloween Trick or Treat Trail at the tent area of the campground - presented by the Cloudland High School Drama Club.

Sat., October 27

Traditional Arts Workshop: Primitive Pottery - Firing Techniques (Part II)

10 am - 4 pm at the Miller Homestead

Instructors: Chris Edens, Clark Sams, Bobby Estep

Registration Fee: not yet determined

Limit : 12 participants

Remember to get your name on our mailing list, as before long, our 2002 calendar of events will be available. We are planning another exciting list of traditional arts workshops, which will include quilting, flint knapping, playing the mountain dulcimer, drawing from the right side of the brain, spinning, nature writing, smocking, primitive pottery, loom beading, basketry, blacksmithing, chair caning, natural dying, watercolor techniques, weaving, papermaking, felting, and more.

To get on our mailing list, please call or write, Jennifer Laughlin, Roan Mountain State Park, 1015 Hwy 143, Roan Mountain, TN 37687; 1-423-772-0190, Extension 108; or email - jlaughlin@mail.state.tn.us

A Worthwhile Investment

Published six times a year, The TENNESSEE CONSERVATIONIST magazine is dedicated to promoting the mission of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to preserve, protect and wisely use the state's natural and cultural resources. Each issue contains beautiful photographs and informative articles. Contributing authors have included Friends of Roan Mountain members, Bob Fulcher and Jennifer Laughlin. The Tennessee Conservationist is working to become self-supporting due to state budget cuts. Use a subscription form or go online - http://www.state.tn.us/environment/tn_consv/



Only 15 clams ...
...and a pearl inside each one!

Six times a year *The Tennessee Conservationist* enriches you with gem-quality articles and sparkling photography. So, mussel on in and subscribe today.

Name _____ new gift
Address _____ renewal
City _____ State _____ Zip _____ 1 year - \$15.00
Sign gift card from _____ 2 years - \$22.00
Make check payable to *The Tennessee Conservationist* and mail to: 3 years - \$30.00
The Tennessee Conservationist, Department of Environment and
Conservation, Nashville, TN 37243-0440. (Payment must accompany order)

