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## **Starting Operation Recovery Banding at Red Creek**

"Take me home, country road," sings the balladeer, recalling fond West Virginia memories for me. One of my fondest memories is banding birds and camping alone for more than a week in September 1959 at the Red Creek cabin site (now a popular campground for people visiting the Dolly Sod Wilderness) and returning on later weekends to complete the season's banding. In the narrative below, I recall personal aspects of the experience that weren't included in my summary report for the Brooks Bird Club journal. See the 1959 Results posted on this website, for a discussion of operational details, landscape features, a day-by-day summary of results by species, and background. These two pieces together, hopefully, provide readers some insights and a sense of the place as experienced in my bird banding there nearly half a century ago - a place now recognized as a nationally significant landscape and resource area.

I had been to the Allegheny Front several times before 1959 to see migrating raptors and other birds. In fact, on Sunday, September 14, 1958, just days before the trial banding on the mountain, I tallied (undoubtedly with great delight) my "Life List" golden eagle there. Exactly two weeks later, I added a marsh hawk (now a harrier) to my annual list while on the mountain. As a college student, I always hitched a ride with other birders. I didn't have a car. I was happy walking from my boarding house to classes on the West Virginia University campus and around Morgantown. Getting out to bird watch or to catch a ride home for holidays or semester breaks wasn't difficult. In the summer of 1959 my brother, two years my junior, convinced our folks that his '52 Chevy coupe was "worn out." With a car I could get on the Allegheny Front, and around, on my own. Also, I'd be graduating before long. "That car can't be in that bad of shape," I thought. So, his old car was now mine - for better or worse.

I was eager to band on the Allegheny Front. I missed being with the small crew for the brief trial banding the previous September. See 1958 Trial Banding posted on this website. The crew's experiences, coupled with other indicators, seriously whet appetites to start a sustained fall bird banding effort on the mountain. With some time available before first semester classes began, I decided to drive up on the mountain, stay a while, and band. Encouragement from Dr. George A. Hall wasn't needed, but welcomed. Since my freshman year, Dr. Hall and I, while birding, often discussed songbird and fall migrant banding opportunities, a subject I could speak to from first hand knowledge. Though only twenty one years old, by September 1959 I'd banded for several years. As an active youth with the Maryland Ornithological Society and a high school student, I assisted established banders with various projects before getting my own license and afterwards also. While in high school, I opened and operated a banding station on the family farm in northeastern Maryland. Mom supported me, of course, but she played no role in my banding. (I only mention this because Dr. Hall misstates this family link in his

1996 interview, A Founder's Story, posted with this site.) Also, for a few seasons before classes or on weekend visits, I helped with fall migration banding at Ocean City, Maryland. Actually, I worked with the crew there on September 6, 7, and 8, 1958, only a few days before seeing my "Life List" golden eagle. The banding north of Ocean City was an integral part of a much larger program ramping-up at that time, called Operation Recovery. The geographic scope of Operation Recovery, initially a program along the eastern seaboard, significantly expanded with the start in 1959 of a sustained fall banding program on the Allegheny Front.

My "new" car went up the mountain without a hitch, perhaps in defiance of its alleged worn-out condition. I could only wonder. The old coupe had ample room for my nets, other banding gear, and all the camping equipment and supplies needed for an extended stay at the Red Creek cabin site (commonly called the Red Creek Station for Operation Recovery reporting for the next few years). I'd made it there on my own and was ready to go. My first priority: get the nets up. I didn't have to ponder net locations or do much lane clearing and site preparation. Dr. Hall and I had addressed these matters earlier; we had a plan. I'd also gotten my government authorization to band in Maryland revised and updated to include West Virginia. Six nets were up, ready and working before sundown. I put up four more the next morning and operated with ten nets for the next eight days. We expanded the set to fifteen nets on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>. With my fussing around, putting up the nets, and the lateness of the day, there wasn't much activity in the nets. Nonetheless, thanks to three catbirds and a swamp sparrow that happened into my mist nets that Thursday afternoon, September 3, 1959, the sustained, annual fall songbird banding effort on the mountain had begun!

My camp site, of course, was secondary to banding activities. The main challenge: avoid fresh cow pies scattered all around the area and keep my bedroll and tent off cow paths leading into the bush. The thought, too, of a roving cow going through nets after dark was really unsettling and a bigger worry than a grouse or turkey ripping a hole through a net's wispy mesh. I put my Army surplus pup tent up in a grassy opening below the spring and west of the stream, beside an old picnic table and fire ring. The setup worked well for my eleven days as a Red Creek cabin site resident. My camp site was basic, but adequate. This was a matter of little consequence considering the superlative, natural attributes, and even the feel, of the mountain. Take the clear September night sky, for instance. Oh, that beautiful night sky. Stars flickered across the wide horizon and brighter stars overhead seemed almost close enough to touch. So there was no sleeping in the tent on clear nights. As a boy, I often watched the night sky at home. On clear, hot summer nights my family often sat on the grass to relax, watch the night sky and (here's the practicality of it) to give the old farm house time to cool down a bit before bedtime. Boyhood memories paled compared to the night sky on this mountain top.

The peace and quiet of the mountain, interrupted only occasionally by a cowbell clang or a cow mooing in the distance, were a profound pleasure too. (All the traffic I've

encountered on the mountain during visits to the station since returning in 2001 just reinforced my appreciation of the solitude the mountain provided in 1959.) I didn't keep track of my visitors that September. Essentially, I had the whole place to myself. It may be hard to imagine today that only a dozen or so rigs passed by the Red Creek cabin site in eleven consecutive days. Most didn't even stop, though I've always had a hard time imagining driving by and not, at least, checking out the spring and its flow. The traffic then was strictly local folk: farmers, mostly checking on their stock, or berry pickers. One farmer I'll never forget. He pulled in and parked his beat-up pickup. He was looking for his cows. We got to talking and he was really curious about what I was doing. I explained and showed him a towhee that I had to band. Without hesitation, he remarked, "Oh, that's an Irish Robin." I was startled by this common name that I'd never before heard. Later, I checked lots of references, but found none that listed Irish Robin as a common name for a towhee. We both learned something that day. A few other people, mostly Brooks Bird Club folks, visited the station before we shut down the 1959 operation. Mr. John L. Smith ("Johnny" in Dr. Hall's 1996 interview) was there on the last day and taking pictures. Three are posted on this website. Thanks to his photos and remarkable archives, we're sure that October 11, 1959, was not a sunny Sunday on the mountain. His photos, as far as I know, are the earliest of this banding station, though it would be nice to assemble other early photos, if available.

The 1959 Report I wrote for *The Redstart*, as noted, provides lots of detail about the birds banded and other contextual information. Also, in thinking back, a big plus of my Red Creek experience comes to mind: there were no clouds of the huge mosquitoes that constantly, it seemed, plagued our net tending in the coastal marshes. Out of all the birds I banded at the cabin site, two were really special. They weren't songbirds, but they were "firsts". I didn't have to actually remove the cooper's hawk, netted on September 11, to appreciate its dangerous talons. I handled it gingerly and didn't get hurt. Only long afterwards, did I learn about using juice cans to quietly and safely hold accipiters and falcons for banding. The two little saw whet owls, captured were thrilling too. Several times in the past, I'd been close to one. That didn't compare to examining the bird in hand.

All too fast, the time came to take down and close up. My '52 Chevy coupe did not falter in taking me off the mountain and into town in time for classes. The following summer (at the Army's no-option "request"), I drove it across the country. And, over the next year, on free weekends, we birded with it and explored canyons and remote country roads in west Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. In the middle of 1961 the old car, requiring only a brief stop for a water pump in Carlsbad, NM, brought me and my bride (and everything we owned) back to her West Virginia home. Soon afterwards, my folks sold it for me, since, to the chagrin of my bride and me, the Army was unbending: neither she nor the car could go to Korea. (On the bright side, pintails, mallards, teal and pheasants - and lots of new species - were abundant in Korea, but that's another story.)

Post Script: The following is beyond my personal 1959 experiences discussed above. While going through old files, I chanced on three Red Creek Station annual reports from the 1960s. Each report thanks volunteers who staffed the respective efforts. Dr. George A. Hall's 1996 interview is rich with colorful anecdotes and, (significantly, in my view) laced with recognition of the station's numerous volunteers, banders and non-banders, and their substantial contributions over many years. More than a few have passed away and, in some cases, I understand, the next generation has stepped-in. Some readers might have an interest in seeing specific "lineups" from back then. Clearly, the station's success from 1959 down to the present day has hinged entirely on the collective and cooperative support of many dedicated people, not a single individual, or even two or three people. In each case the text quoted below was published as the sixth paragraph in these summaries, all were prepared by George A. Hall. As noted below, banding activities were moved from the campground to the rim in 1966. Sometime in the process the station became known as the Allegheny Front Migratory Observatory.

#### OPERATION RECOVERY 1964

##### ALLEGHENY FRONT MOUNTAIN TUCKER COUNTY, W.VA.

"As in previous years only two banders, Ralph K Bell and George A. Hall were active at the project. Several other people assisted from time to time and we should acknowledge the assistance of Norris Gluck, Howard Reimerdinger, George Hurley, George Koch, Nevada Leitsch, John Morgan, Larry Schwab, Don Shearer and Cora Williams."

#### OPERATION RECOVERY 1966

##### ALLEGHENY FRONT MOUNTAIN GRANT COUNTY, W.VA.

"Again this year several other bander besides the station leaders, R. K. Bell and G. A. Hall participated. These were Clark Miller, Ann Shreve, and Connie Katholi. But very special thanks goes to Cora Williams who operated the station through much of September. As in the past many other persons provided assistance, and even though all cannot be mentioned individually, we do want to gratefully acknowledge such help."

This report includes a note.

"Added Note: Those who pay attention to the heading on the first page may think we have moved the station. It turns out that while the campground is (probably) in Tucker County, the Rim station is in Grant County. This year for the first time no banding was done at the campground."

#### OPERATION RECOVERY 1968

##### ALLEGHENY FRONT MOUNTAIN GRANT COUNTY, W.VA.

"Besides project leaders Ralph Bell and George Hall other banders who participated were

Cora Williams, Maxine Kiff, John Morgan, Connie Katholi, Ann Shreve, and Jack Lineham. Special thanks is due the last three who did provide us with our only mid-week coverage. Tom and Ginny Olson again left their trailer at the Campground for the use of the banders. As in the past numerous other member of the Brooks Bird Club provided help and companionship during the project. While it is not possible to list all of them, their services were appreciated."