

[Band#] 65290

from A Sand County Almanac

Aldo Leopold

1949

"To band a bird is to hold a ticket in a great lottery. Most of us hold tickets on our own survival, but we buy them from the insurance company which knows too much to sell us a really sporting chance. It is an exercise in objectivity to hold a ticket on the banded sparrow that falleth, or on the banded chickadee that may someday re-enter your trap, and thus prove that he is still alive.



The tyro gets his thrill from banding new birds; he's a kind of game against himself, striving to break his previous score for total numbers. But to the old timer the banding of new birds becomes merely pleasantly routine; the real thrill lies in the recapture of some bird banded long ago, some bird whose age, adventures, and previous condition of appetite are perhaps better known to you than to the bird himself.

Thus in our family, the question whether chickadee 65290 would survive for still another winter was, for five years, a sporting question of the first magnitude.

Beginning a decade ago, we have trapped and banded most of the chickadees on our farm each winter. In early winter, the traps yield mostly unbanded birds; these presumably are mostly the young of the year which, once banded, can thereafter be 'dated.' As the winter wears on, unbanded birds cease to appear in the trap; we then know that the local population consists largely of marked birds. We can tell from the band numbers how many birds are present, and how many of these are survivors from each previous year of banding.

65290 was one of seven chickadees constituting the 'class of 1937.' When he first entered our trap, he showed no signs of visible evidence of genius. Like his classmates, his valor for suet was greater than his discretion. Like his classmates, he bit my finger when being taken out of the trap. When banded and released, he fluttered up to a limb, pecked his new aluminum anklet in mild annoyance, shook his mussed feathers, cursed gently, and hurried away to catch up with the gang. It is doubtful he drew any philosophical deductions from his experience (such as 'all is not ant eggs that glitters'), for he was caught again three times that same winter.

By the second winter our recaptures showed that the class of seven had shrunk to 3, and by the third winter to 2. By the fifth winter 65290 was the sole survivor of his generation. Signs of genius were still lacking, but of his extraordinary capacity for living, there was now historical proof.

During his sixth winter 65290 failed to reappear, and the verdict of 'missing in action' is now confirmed by his absence during four subsequent trappings. At that, of the 97 chicks banded during the decade, 65290 was the only one contriving to survive

for five winters. Three reached 4 years, 7 reached 3 years, 19 reached 2 years, and 67 disappeared after their first winter. Hence if I were selling insurance to chicks, I could compute the premium with assurance. But this would raise the problem: in what currency would I pay the widows? I suppose in ants eggs.

I know so little about birds that I can only speculate on why 65290 survived his fellows. Was he more clever in dodging his enemies? What enemies? A chickadee is almost too small to have any. That whimsical fellow called evolution, having enlarged the dinosaur until he tripped over his own toes, tried shrinking the chickadee until he was just too big to be snapped up by flycatchers as an insect, and just too little to be pursued by hawks and owls as meat. Then he regarded his handiwork and laughed. Everyone laughs at so small a bundle of large enthusiasms.

The sparrow hawk, the screech owl, and the shrike, and especially the midget saw-whet owl might find it worthwhile to kill a chickadee; but I've only once found evidence of actual murder: a Screech owl pellet contained one of my bands. Perhaps these small bandits have a fellow-feeling for midgets.

It seems likely that weather is the only killer so devoid of both humor and dimension as to kill a chickadee. I suspect that in the chickadee Sunday School two mortal sins are taught: thou shalt not venture into windy places in winter, thou shalt not get wet before a blizzard.

I learned the second commandment on drizzly winter dusk while watching a band of chicks going to roost in my woods. The drizzle came out of the south but I could tell it would turn northwest and bitter cold before morning. The chicks went to bed in a dead oak, the bark of which had peeled and warped into curls, cups, and hollows of various sizes, shapes, and exposures. The bird selecting a roost dry against the south drizzle, but vulnerable to a north one, would surely be frozen by morning. The bird selecting a roost dry from all sides would awaken safe. This, I think, is the kind of wisdom that spells survival in chickdom, and accounts for 65290 and his like.

The chickadees fear of windy places is easily deduced from his behavior. In winter he ventures away from woods only on calm days, and the distance varies inversely as the breeze....To the chickadee, winter wind is the boundary of the habitable world. If the chickadee had an office, the maxim over his desk would say: 'Keep calm.'

...

I suspect there is a third commandment in chickdom: thou shalt investigate every loud noise. When we start chopping in our woods, the chicks at once appear and stay until the felled tree or riven log has exposed new insect eggs or pupae for their delectation. The discharge of a gun will likewise summon chicks, but with less satisfactory dividends.

What served as their dinner bell before the day of axes, mauls, and guns? Presumably the crash of fallen trees. In December, 1940, an ice storm felled an extraordinary number of dead snags and living limbs in our woods. Our chicks

scoffed at the trap for a month, being replete with the dividends of the storm.

65290 has long since gone to his reward. I hope that in his new woods, great oaks full of ants' eggs keep falling all day long, with never a wind to ruffle his composure or take the edge off his appetite. And I hope that he still wears my band."

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