

[From Summer 2002]

Bird Banding

Migration season is the time of year that brings many species of birds in great numbers southward in the Fall and back up north again in the Spring. The Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge witnesses a spectacular concentration of birds, in part because of its geographical location. Some researchers take advantage of this fact and are able to employ an age-old technique of monitoring birds known as bird banding.

People have been banding birds in Europe for centuries, and the first records of banding in North America are those of John James Audubon in the early 1800's. However, the current system of banding was modeled after the efforts of a Danish schoolteacher during the late 1800's. He inscribed metal bands to wrap around the legs of birds, with his name and address in the hopes that they would be returned if found.

The technique is fairly straightforward. Birds are captured using nets. Then, with the bird in hand, measurements and observations are recorded as necessary. A band is attached to its leg, and the bird is released.

Markers attached to the legs of birds in the early days included string. But today most bands used are usually aluminum inscribed with an identification number. Recently, plastic bands have been available for use, color-coded for easier identification at a distance. Hopefully, banded birds will be recaptured in the future and reported.

But why band birds? There are some who believe that unnecessary danger is imparted to the bird every time it flies into a net and is handled by human hands. However, the effects are minimal compared to the amount of information we have learned from studies involving bird banding.

We now know more about bird migration pathways, population sizes and growth, reproductive success, life spans and survival rates. Even bird behavior and information on social structure has been learned, in part, from bird banding.

By understanding more about birds and their place in the environment, we can attempt to do things that will benefit them - which in turn will benefit us, in the long run. However, not everybody can go out and capture and band birds. Banding in the United States is controlled under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and requires a federal banding permit. Some states require a state permit as well. There are apprentice programs available for those who wish to learn how to properly capture and band birds.

If you do come across a banded bird, it would be helpful to report it to the proper authorities. The Patuxent Bird Banding Laboratory coordinates the marking projects in the United States. They issue permits, provide bands, and maintain the data collected by banders. They can be reached at 1-800-327-BAND from anywhere in Canada, the United States, and most of the Caribbean. The operator will need to know the band number, how, when, and where the bird or band was found. The information you give will greatly enhance our knowledge of the birds around us.

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