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Fred C. Sibley

Jeffrey A. Spendelow

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What's wrong with migration studies?

Fred C. Sibley and Jeffrey A. Spindel

After reading the recent articles by Reed (*EBBA News* 38:84-85, *NABB* 1:178-9) on the future and values of banding, we have accepted the invitation to present another point of view. Perhaps we have misread Reed's intent, or perhaps his case was overstated to elicit replies. To us the articles lower the boom on backyard banders: "Shape up or ship out;" "Do it this way or not at all." The casual bander is further shamed for wasting taxpayers' money, harassing birds, and undertaking banding as an enjoyable hobby. The study of migration, other than waterfowl migration, seems to be ruled out as an acceptable project. Although agreeing that some banding may not be worth the effort and that some is non-goal oriented, we are not in agreement with all of Reed's solutions.

Reed's project suggestions are excellent, but not everyone has the time or interest necessary. There are alternatives to project banding and people who band birds without expecting to publish serve not just a useful but an essential service. A migration study undertaken without the assistance of cooperating amateurs would produce few results. Therefore, let's not belittle the value of backyard banders or dictate what they should do lest we discourage them completely. Make suggestions, yes; give assistance, yes; but threats of permit removal for non-conformity, no.

Banding is a cooperative project between the government and the individual bander. The financial contribution of the bander is greater than that of the banding office (taxpayer) and banders donate their time. Regardless of species banded, it costs X dollars per 100 to process band data. These data are then available to match foreign retraps or recoveries. No band recovery or foreign retrap equals no return on the investment in processing. This is as true for the Redstart that vanishes into the Atlantic as for the Black-capped Chickadee that is recaptured 222 times at the site of banding. The banding office is better organized to study migratory movements of birds than to coordinate ecological studies. Until the banding office processes returns, the so-called waste of taxpayer

money is as pronounced in the ecological study as in the banding of migrant warblers. In both cases the small taxpayer investment is money well spent.

Reed states that from an economic viewpoint (information return per dollar?) ecological studies are better. If we want answers on migration, what importance is it to know we can get more facts per hour studying rocks? The bander is footing most of the bill and should have the choice of what to study. The power of the banding office or banding organization to dictate should not be unlimited. As Reed and Bartel (*NABB* 1:35) point out, many banders like to band a variety of birds, measure their success in numbers banded, and work on migration studies. Let's capitalize on this interest rather than say "change or get out."

We do agree that some banding is hardly worth the effort and offer coastal fall migrant Redstarts as our candidate for the worst investment. Like many other warblers it has large population size, short life span, breeds and/or winters mainly outside the U.S., and is easily banded only on migration. Birds banded on the coast each fall are mainly young birds. Few, if any, have been banded prior to their arrival at the coastal banding stations, and few, if any, will be caught on their wintering grounds. The percentage of the population banded is too small to produce one return per year even if all the birds surviving to the next fall returned to the same station. Until these shortcomings are overcome, banding warblers will continue to produce marginal results and calls for increased banding efforts on such species are unwarranted. Spreading fall banding over many stations instead of concentrating on the coast and banding nesting and wintering birds would increase the probability of a foreign retrap.

Can EBBA members supply a list of migrants that have potential for non-project banding? These would be suggestions for banders who want to make a contribution with their banding but don't want to do a lot of reading and planning, publish, or become involved in a large cooperative project.

As examples we offer shorebirds, Blue Jay, and Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

Banding shorebirds may require some modification of your techniques, traveling to new banding localities, and probably getting wet and muddy. The results are well worth it. There are enough projects already under way on nesting and/or wintering shorebirds that your chances of catching a banded bird or having your band recovered are high. The junior author has netted only 200 Semipalmated Sandpipers but has had two foreign retraps of birds banded in Canada.

Almost everyone has banded Blue Jays. Of all the birds the senior author has trapped in his backyard, these have given the best recovery rate (4 foreign retraps in six years from 100 birds banded). The Blue Jay is a relatively long-lived bird with marked seasonal movements. It is also a bird large enough that reports of dead birds from non-banders are likely. Effort expended on this species should be amply repaid.

The Sharp-tailed Sparrow has produced results for us in Connecticut with a limited effort and should do likewise for individual or group projects elsewhere. The coastal subspecies have the requirements of the ideal migrant. They breed and winter mainly in the U.S. They are easily netted on nesting and wintering grounds, and even more easily netted on migration. The preferred habitat (salt marshes) is easily identified and relatively accessible. The birds concentrate on migration with both adults and young following the coast. The total population is small compared to that of

most warblers and sparrows. The five subspecies fall into two groups easily separated in the field. Two subspecies breed in the interior and migrate overland, presenting possibilities for comparison with the coastal nesters and migrants. Interested? We are willing to offer encouragement or advice based on our experience with this species in Connecticut.

The desire to have EBBA sponsor some sort of cooperative project is voiced by Reed and Bartel and seconded by us. We would like to see an Operation Transect type project. That project, started by Point Reyes Bird Observatory, was modeled after Operation Recovery, but the line of stations was oriented at right angles to the coast. Approximately 10 stations, each with 10 nets, were evenly spaced from offshore San Francisco to the Nevada border. These were run for 10 days at the peak of spring migration to give comparative data on species composition and timing of migration. The results were impressive and provided the unexpected bonus of two direct foreign retraps. Such an operation on the East Coast would complement the data obtained on Operation Recovery, appeal to all Operation Recovery fans, and would be more significant than the present concentration of banding effort at a few coastal stations.

We wish to thank Reed and Bartel for their papers and the invitation to respond. We hope other EBBA banders will add their opinions and suggestions to this debate. ♦

Peabody Museum, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. 06520

Letter to the Editor

"A Bald Eagle soared over a craggy mountain ledge."

"The sleek Peregrine plummeted from the sky, and in seconds swooped up its prey."

"The plaintive sound of a lone Great Horned Owl was heard as the moon rose over the restless trees."

These phrases, which so aptly describe the princes among birds, may soon vanish from our language, if man keeps on with his wanton destruction of habitat: fouling of the air space, destruction of food supplies, and poisoning our natural waters. Though few take us (birders and banders) seriously, advances in man's "progress" may eradicate many raptor species much sooner than we would like to believe.

Many banders like to read about raptors. Increased participation of raptor banders in our publications and the widespread acceptance of their efforts bear testimony to that. Yet, we read only about the better known raptor banders, notably Bill Clark and one or two others. I think the time is *long overdue* for a regular column, similar to, or even a major part of "Atlantic Flyway Review" — after all, raptors share a major portion of our flyways each Spring and Fall.

The only way to keep raptors from eventual doom is to place them in the editorial spotlight on a continuous basis. Let the world read about these interesting species and then let everyone know what EBBA and WBBA members are doing to study them, and prolong their stay in our midst.

Fred S. Schaeffer
Jamaica, NY

Characteristics of Canada Warblers

John and Heather Riggins

A *Bird-Bander's Guide to Determination of Age and Sex of Selected Species* by Merrill Wood indicates that "distinct black speckles" on the forehead and the crown of Canada Warblers (*Wilsonia canadensis*) accompanied by a very prominent black necklace are a characteristic of the adult male. Adult females (January through May) and unknown age and sex birds (June through December) are listed in Wood as having a "greenish forehead" and blurred necklace, sometimes very indistinct.

On 20 August 1976, at their banding station on the South Harpeth River in Tennessee, the authors netted a Canada Warbler that did not fit these guidelines. This bird had a forehead with many black spots and a relatively distinct necklace. However, when the bird was skulled to determine age, it was found that it was HY (this bird had just begun to show ossification on its skull). Two additional Canada Warblers were later netted which displayed black spotted foreheads and distinct necklaces (one had a very prominent necklace). Both of these Canada Warblers proved to be HY when skulled.

During the fall season of 1976 we netted a total of 12 Canada Warblers. Two were adults and seven were HY with greenish foreheads and indistinct necklaces. The only three HY Canada Warblers which were judged to be males by their distinct necklaces all proved to be HY **despite black speckles on their foreheads and crowns.**

Thomas Roberts, in *The Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States*, reports that in the **first fall** and winter plumage, the young male Canada Warbler has **traces of black on the crown** and black spots forming a narrow necklace. Jonathan Dwight, Jr., in *The Sequence of Plumages and Moults of the Passerine Birds of New York*, also reports the crown "sometimes flecked with black" in the first winter plumage. Dwight states that this plumage is acquired in early July.

Arthur Cleveland Bent, in the *Life Histories of North American Wood Warblers*, quotes this same section from Dwight in the section on plumages of the Canada Warbler.

We agree with Wood that black specks on the forehead and crown and a distinct necklace are accurate characteristics of the **male** Canada Warbler, but we do not believe that the previously published information can allow a determination of **age**. The occurrence of black speckling in the male Canada Warbler appears to be too variable to allow for accurate aging. We feel that skulling for direct observation of ossification is still the only reliable determination of age in male Canada Warblers.

We feel banders should be very careful in utilizing the information for Canada Warblers in Merrill Wood's *Bird-Banding Guide*. If we had attempted to sex our three birds by plumage characteristics alone, we would have been wrong on all of these HY birds. ♦

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746 Harpeth Parkway West, Nashville, TN 37221

