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News, Notes, Comments

North American Bird Bander

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Vulture Vibes



Logo sketch by Barb Petorak

I have just concluded a very successful summer and fall study (1980) of 5 Turkey and 1 Black Vulture roosting sites and seven successful nesting sites here in Pennsylvania. The roosting sites contain as few as 12 and as many as 200 vultures in the populations. The nesting areas each fledged 1 to 2 birds.

These populations have left to migrate to their various wintering grounds, leaving us to relax a little bit and plan new strategies for trapping and marking for next spring and summer.

Of interest, Dr. D. Michael Fry of the Department of Avian Sciences, University of California at Davis, has started a movement to set up a Vulture Study Group in the United States. His personal ideas for the group include: "(1) A forum for exchange of information on vultures; (2) An organization to enable collaboration and cooperation of research efforts such as trapping and tagging birds or locating birds for individual research projects; and (3) A clearing house for providing information on housing and feeding requirements or conditions suitable for captive breeding." If anyone would like any additional information or has any questions or suggestions, please contact Dr. Fry at: Department of Avian Sciences, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

With the decline of vulture populations throughout the world, such as the Cape Vulture in Africa, the Lammergeier Vulture in Europe, the Andean Condor in South America, the King Vulture in Central America, and of course — of grave concern to us — the California Condor, I think there should also be an increasing amount of research carried out with these birds. This can start with us and with banding and continued study of the more-abundant, but equally important, Turkey and Black Vultures. It is our responsibility, as vulture researchers, to express our desires and ideas for formulating an efficient way to effectively mark these birds so as not to harm them in any way. Please submit any ideas or suggestions you may have to the Bird Banding Laboratory so this much-needed research may continue.

If anyone has any ideas, suggestions, gripes, or any information they feel may be of interest to readers of this column, please contact: Nancy L. Karner, 126 Pennsylvania Avenue, Bangor, PA 18013.

Northeastern Hawk Migration Conference

The Northeastern Hawk Migration Conference will be held 4 April 1981 at the Holiday Inn in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Registration forms are available from: Hawk, P.O. Box 212, Portland, CT 06480.

There are special rates for lodging at the conference center. Registration will be limited.

Dr. W. Rydzewski

Professor Dr. Rydzewski, Editor of *The Ring* (see *North American Bird Bander* 5:59), passed away on 28 August 1980 after a three-month's illness. I was informed by H. Slowikowska, Secretary of the Museum of Natural History, Sienkiewicza 21, Wroclaw, Poland of this sad news. The ornithologists of the Museum will do their best to continue to edit *The Ring*.

F.S. Schaeffer

Why are bird bands numbered instead of lettered?

Why are bird bands numbered instead of lettered? There are 26 letters in the alphabet, giving a greater permutation with fewer spaces. The background for this question follows:

For the past 9 years, a collaboration of 3 research groups at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory has been capturing and banding hummingbirds (1005 hummingbirds banded). Especially in the past 2 years we seem to have "gotten everybody" in the adult breeding population of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds (see tabulation, Balph, 1980, NABB 5:77). The results are exciting: a 53% return of 1979 females in 1980 and a 23% return of males, 2 records of 8-year longevity, the first survivorship curve for hummingbirds, quantification of Rufous and Calliope migrants, and some information on nest-site re-use by Broad-tails.

However, there are 2 disappointments. First, we have only same-site data, with no idea of where the transients come from or where our breeders migrate. As long as hummingbird-banding is limited to few cooperators, there is little hope of getting point-to-point data. The number of banders is limited by the number of bands available within, presumably, the permutation of 5 digits that can fit on an X-band — X-00000 to X-99999. Second, we have had a couple of embarrassing mis-readings of bands assumed to be from elsewhere.

As small as these numbers are, and as delicate as are the feet of a hummingbird, it is not easy to read and record accurately the 5 numbers on the tight curvature of an installed X-band.

If the Bird Banding Laboratory could issue letter-bands with a 4-letter sequence, the permutation of AAAA to ZZZZ is 26^4 or 456,976. This is almost 5 times as many bands with only 4 characters to read and keep straight. In addition, letters can be verbalized, so that error of transposition such as ours would be less likely.

State Motor Vehicle Divisions have been doing this for years, using letters for the first 3 characters on auto tags. While such a solution is especially needed for hummingbird bands with a closed dia-

meter of less than 2 mm, it would also facilitate reading band numbers on larger birds via spotting scope. Like most sizes, size 7B bands show 8 numbers. The same quantity of bands could be handled using 6 letters — 2 for band series and 456,976 bands per series with 4 letters. Even if G, L, N, and Q were eliminated because of possible confusion with C, I, M, and O, the exponential permutations of 22 are much higher than 10!

This suggestion is being transmitted to the Bird Banding Laboratory. However, in view of the overworked, under-funded situation there, suggestions seem to need relatively widespread support to justify their serious considerations. BBL has fallen behind in filling band orders. If supplies are depleted, this would be a good time to change to letters.

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Two characters for the juvenile plumage

A good many species of oscine passeriform birds practically lack juvenile feathers in two places and are usually late in producing first winter feathering in the areas. These areas are the tibiotarsus (drumstick) and the axilla. In the case of the latter area the most anterior and longest underwing coverts are produced early, but a stream of air from behind will lift them and reveal the bare axilla.

Charles H. Blake