

1982

News, Notes, Comments

North American Bird Bander

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Recommended Citation

North American Bird Bander (1982) "News, Notes, Comments," *North American Bird Bander*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb/vol7/iss2/8>

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News, Notes, Comments

A longevity record for the Black Skimmer

Herbert W. Kale II and Robert W. Loftin

On 28 June 1978, Loftin and Hugh Ellis captured a Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) at Ward's Bank, 1 mile (1.6 km) north of Mayport, Duval County, Florida. The bird was mist-netted at night in a breeding colony under conditions that indicated that the bird was nesting. The bird had been banded as a fledgling (#524-50173) by Kale at Little Egg Island, a sandbar in the mouth of Altamaha Sound, McIntosh County, Georgia, on 13 August 1958. Thus, at the time of capture, the bird was about 6 weeks short of being at least 20 years old.

Ward's Bank is about 75 miles (120 km) south of Little Egg Island. A detailed description of Little Egg Island was published by Kale, Sciple, and Tomkins (*Bird Banding* 36:21-27, 1965). Earlier recoveries of Black Skimmers from this colony were summarized by Kale (*Oriole* 32:13-16, 1967).

This bird, along with 3 others, was captured to be used for physiological studies under permits held by Dr. Ellis. They were taken to Gainesville, Florida, and then to Ames, Iowa, for study. The plan was to release the birds after study but, unfortunately, all of them died in captivity. The banded skimmer survived for several weeks in captivity, an indication that it was in healthy condition when captured.

Neither Loftin nor Ellis knew at the time that retaining a foreign recovery in captivity was improper procedure. Inasmuch as the bird was already banded, it should have been released immediately after recording of data.

We were informed by Kathleen Klimkiewicz of the Bird Banding Laboratory that this band recovery is a longevity record for the Black Skimmer.

Kale: Florida Audubon Society, 1101 Audubon Way, Maitland, FL 32751.

Loftin: University of North Florida, Box 17074, Jacksonville, FL 32216.

Research Grants

The Eastern Bird Banding Association and the Western Bird Banding Association are each offering a research grant of \$250 in aid of research using bird banding techniques or bird banding data. Applicants should submit a resumé of his or her banding or ornithological background, the project plan, and a budget to the joint selection committee chairman: Robert C. Leberman, Powdermill Nature Reserve, Star Route South, Rector, PA 15677.

No formal application forms are available, and the amount requested should not exceed \$250. The deadline for receipt of applications is 15 March 1983.

EBBA and WBBA Memorial Grants

This year one Western Bird Banding Association memorial grant was made for research using bird banding techniques; and the council of the Eastern Bird Banding Association authorized a total of four awards at their April meeting. All awards were in the amount of \$250 each.

The recipient of the W.B.B.A. grant is **Peter Arcese**, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia. His project is titled, "Correlates and consequences of dominance behavior in the Song Sparrow on Mandarte Island, B.C."

The four Eastern recipients are (alphabetically): (1) **Opal H. Dakin**, a graduate student at Mississippi State University, for "Nesting phenology, nest site selection, and reproductive success of Starlings in Mississippi;" (2) **Bonita Eliason**, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, for "Mating system, parental care, and individual reproductive strategies in the Blackpoll Warbler;" (3) **Theodore W. Gutzke**, Basking Ridge, New Jersey, "Relationship between nesting pairs and the incidence of addled eggs in Eastern Bluebirds;" (4) **Michael P. Lombardo**, a graduate student at Rutgers University, for "Auxiliary birds at Tree Swallow nests."

Robert C. Leberman, Chairman of EBBA/WBBA joint committee on memorial grants.

American Golden Plover project

In August 1979, a comprehensive study of the wintering biology of the American Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*) on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, was initiated. 54 birds have been color-banded (each with a unique combination of bands), and the behavior of individuals is being monitored.

The fall return rate of marked birds has been approximately 80% for the past 2 seasons. Many of the marked plovers are territorial, and each of these has held the same territory in successive winters. Some of these findings have been published in *Elepaio* 41:123-130, 1981.

Oscar W. Johnson, Moorhead, MN
Robert L. Pyle, Kailua, HI

"Homing"

Ithaca, N.Y. Most often, homing pigeons come home. Sometimes, though, entire flocks of carefully trained and reliable homing pigeons become hopelessly confused and are never seen again. Studies of the mysterious homing pigeon "disasters" may lead Cornell University researchers to clues about how creatures as simple as bacteria and as complex as whales and humans are able to figure out where they're going.

Providing valuable financial support for these studies are the people who have the most to lose when their winged athletes don't return — the organized pigeon fanciers from across the U.S.

The funding will help Cornell scientists carry on the studies of the late William T. Keeton, whose widow was the recipient of the 1981 Memorial Award of the American Pigeon Fanciers' Council.

Until his death in 1980 Keeton, an internationally-recognized authority on the sensory bases of bird navigation and migration and professor of neurobiology and behavior, was trying to determine why homing pigeons released at certain areas in New York State can seldom — if ever — tell which way is home. Something about Hornell, a small city in southwestern New York, and the Tug Hill region, a vast plateau west of the Adirondack Mountains, causes homing pigeons to become disoriented or to misread their internal "maps."

Such phenomena are of concern to pigeon owners, who have in the past lost flocks of as many as 5,000 birds.

Keeton is credited with demonstrating conclusively that, contrary to popular belief, the sun is not essential to successful orientation of homing pigeons. His experiments beneath the usually-overcast skies of Ithaca led to the revival of the magnetic hypothesis of animal navigation.

Other researchers have since found deposits of the magnetic material, magnetite, in the heads of pigeons as well as in other organisms including bacteria, bees, and dolphins. The ability to "read" the earth's magnetic field is now thought to be only one of several talents available, in various combinations, to homing pigeons. They seem able to draw information from the position of the sun at any time of day as well as from landmarks they fly over and perhaps even low-frequency sounds that humans cannot detect. A group in Italy even believes that they use familiar odors to find their way home.

Known as the white rats of the bird world, homing pigeons obligingly carry radio beacons, wear coils around their heads that alter the magnetic field and have even been fitted with opaque contact lenses over their eyes. Researchers following behind in airplanes are able to learn from radio-equipped pigeons lessons that can be applied to other animals that are much more difficult to track.

Despite hundreds of tests, notes A. Irene Brown, a research colleague of Keeton's, "the exact role of magnetism in pigeon navigation still eludes us. Birds live in a sensory world very different from the one we think we know."

In collaboration with geologists from the State University of New York at Potsdam, the Cornell pigeon researchers in 1982 will try to determine whether any magnetic or gravity anomalies exist in the Tug Hill or Hornell areas, and whether such irregularities might account for the pigeons' confusion.

Also to be studied are the effects on the magnetic field of iron ore deposits on New England states.

Computer programs will be developed in an attempt to correlate solar flare activity with disruptions in the navigational ability of pigeons.

News Bureau, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853