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The Tube System for Handling Difficult Birds

Susan Craig

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News, Notes, Comments

The Tube System for Handling Difficult Birds

Recently, a friend related to me how she caught a Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*). Alone in the field, she experienced difficulty in handling the bird. We all have been in situations where we have handled such birds: biters like cardinals or grosbeaks, hyperactive birds like towhees, or screamers like woodpeckers or sapsuckers. If you have small hands, a bigger, stronger bird like a Band-tailed Pigeon (*Patagioenas fasciata*) could be a handful. In such situations, especially when working alone, we could use some help in dealing with excited, struggling birds.

Years ago, I started banding Loggerhead Shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*) and realized the need to devise some method for handling these wicked biters in order to prevent puncture wounds and needless bleeding. I found that placing a modified common toilet paper (TP) tube over the head and wings of the bird worked extremely well. I closed off one end, shortened the TP tube's length about two or three cm to get the correct size, and have used this method in the field ever since.

TP tubes come in several sizes depending upon the brand, so I selected larger ones when handling fatter brooding females. An added benefit was the

calming effect the tube had on the bird. Bander stress was also reduced. By sliding the tube up but still keeping the bird's head covered, I could take measurements, assess fat content, examine molt progression, and determine age and sex of the bird. In cold weather, I found that the tube helped prevent the birds from becoming chilled by cold hands. Best of all, tubes were lightweight, cheap, and easily replaced when soiled or damaged.

Different length and/or diameter tubes include toilet paper and paper towel tubes, gift wrap tubes, Pringles® cans (washed before using), and sturdier shipping tubes. With a little imagination, I was able to find a number of plastic containers in the grocery store that worked well, with minor modifications. These include Parmesan cheese cans, Crystal Lite® cans, and frozen juice cans. For clear plastic tubes, I covered the outside with black tape or spray paint, so the calming effect from the darkness was maintained.

To close the end of the open paper tube, I folded two sides into the cardboard tube and secured the end with tape. For a smoother end closure, I glued a disc over the end. In both cases, I punched a



few holes for ventilation in the closed end of the tube. Holes were punched outward, so there were no rough protrusions left inside to harm the bird.

To determine the correct tube size, I made sure the bird slid easily into the tube but closely enough so that the bird could not reach down the inside of the tube to bite or to escape. Once I found the correct size for a given bird species, I wrote the bird names on the tube for future reference. In hot weather, this method must be used with caution, due to the possibility of the bird overheating.

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Susan Craig
1530 Robidoux Circle
Colorado Springs, CO 80915
scraig10@juno.com

Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) Longevity Record

At the Chester River Field Research Center (39.23°N, 79.00°W) we have been studying grassland obligate birds and their response to native grassland restoration since 1999. CRFRC is located on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake

Bay, approximately three miles east of Chestertown in Queen Anne's County, MD. In 1998, 92.4 ha of row crops were taken out of production, enrolled in the USDA's Conservation Practice 2 (CP2) program and converted into 12 contiguous experimental fields of restored native grasslands (Gill et al. 2006).

During ten years of research, CRFRC has banded 2,763 Grasshopper Sparrows (GRSP) with an average of 276 birds each year. The fewest number of birds banded was in 1999, the first year of the study, with only 94 individuals, and a high of 534 GRSPs in 2004. Annual return rates (see Fig.1) have been high during ten years of banding. Since the 2000 breeding season, an average of 57% of the previously banded males, 32% of females, and 11% of the hatch years have returned.

In 2008, three of the oldest known GRSPs returned to the grasslands. One bird was banded as a local in 2000 and two others were banded as after-hatching-year (AHY) adults in 2001. We have to assume a hatch date of 1 Jun 2000 (Kennard 1975) for the two birds banded in 2001 as AHYs, but we were able to determine the exact hatch date of the 2000 bird through our nest monitoring program. Based on hatch dates and dates of last observations, these birds differ by only six days in age. All three of these birds extend the previous

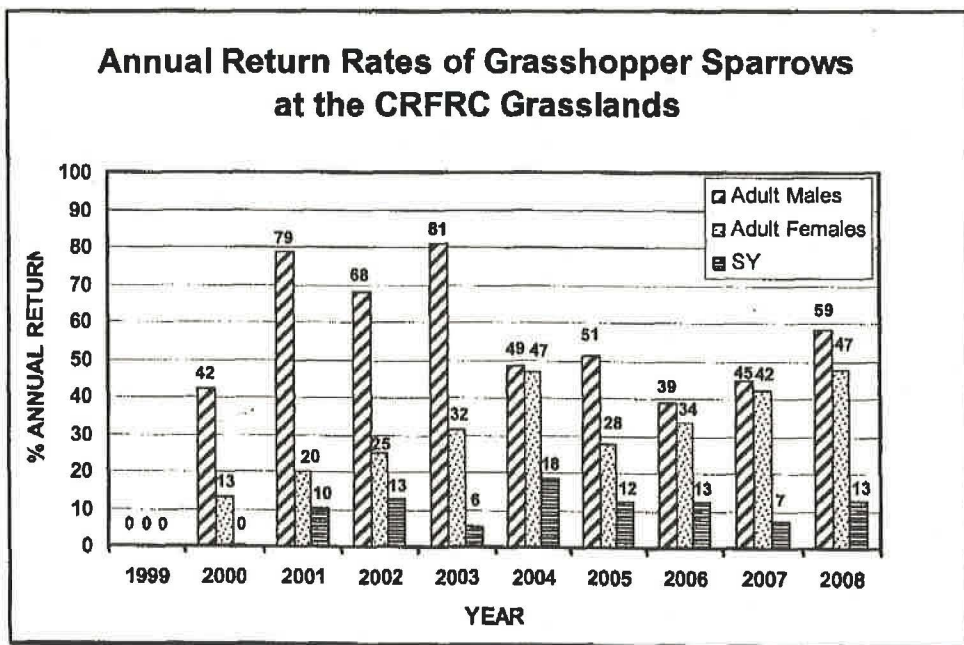


Fig. 1. Return rates of Grasshopper Sparrows in the CRFRC grasslands. SY refers to birds that were banded the year before as free-flying HYs or as Locals from a nest, returning to the grasslands in their second year of life.