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What are the Chances?

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What are the Chances?

In the summer of 2002 the Illinois Audubon Society (IAS) initiated hummingbird festivals at public and private locations throughout the state. The first festival was held at Trail of Tears State Forest in deep southern Illinois and since then, because of their popularity, the number has increased from just two that first year to 15 in 2010. The festivals offer those attending (both young and not-so-young) an opportunity to see these tiny birds up close and personal—perhaps even holding one. How might that be—to hold one? A key part of an IAS-sponsored festival is to have a licensed bird bander capture the birds, place a small, numbered band on their legs, and then release them. It's at release time that visitors have an opportunity to hold one—and then watch it when it makes its speedy departure. One question often asked is: "Why do you band the birds?" Three quick answers are: 1) How old do the birds live to be? 2) Where do they go and do they come back to this same location again? and, 3) How many are there? The actual number of birds captured and banded varies from site to site and from year to year but often ranges from 40 to 80.

In 2003 the "Adopt-A-Bird" feature was added to the festivals. Participants are given an opportunity to "Adopt-A-Bird" by making a \$5 donation to the IAS Land Acquisition Fund (a fund earmarked for the protection of wildlife habitat here in Illinois). Donors who "adopt" birds receive an attractive, signed certificate, are given the privilege of releasing "their" adopted birds, and will be notified if their birds are ever recaptured. In 2009, 1231 banded birds were adopted, and 155 persons were notified that birds they had adopted from 2003 through 2008 had been recaptured (all at the same site as banded). Now, this brings us to "What are the chances?"

One of the sites where IAS has sponsored annual hummingbird festivals since 2003 is Siloam Springs State Park (located on the Adams/Brown County line—east of Quincy). To date, 510 birds

have been banded there—and most were adopted. As typically expected, the majority of birds captured at festivals are not banded; however, about 20 - 30% of the captured birds have been banded (and adopted) there in previous years. The latter is the case of the bird wearing band number N60179.

N60179 was banded as an adult female on 9 Jul 2005 (which means she was hatched in 2004 or earlier); she was recaptured and adopted again in 2006 and 2007 (recaptured birds are eligible for adoption just as if they were "newly banded" birds—after all, they still need to be released by someone!) In 2007 she was the 47th of 49 birds captured that day and adopted by Christa Hall (of Mt. Sterling). N60179 was not captured in 2008 or 2009; however, she was the last bird (of 65 captured) on 10 Jul 2010 and once again adopted by Christa Hall (who had been waiting patiently until the end), unbeknownst at that time, that it was the same bird she had adopted there three years earlier. Although many birds that have been adopted are recaptured (sometimes four or five years after the original adoption), this is the first time that a person was actually present at the time his or her adopted bird was recaptured, plus "adopting" it again without knowing it was the same bird she adopted three years ago.

But, there's more to the story! A second bird that Christa had adopted, this time in 2008, was also captured again this year. So, with the recapture rate as low as it is, "what are the chances" that one adopter will have two adopted birds recaptured on the same date, or, adopting and releasing the same bird two different years?

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