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Moving Toward Zero

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IBBA Newsletter from 1979 - 1986; and ***IBBA News*** from 1965 (vol. 37) to 1968 (vol. 40). Please email hutche@siu.edu to make inquiries about obtaining copies of any of these publications. Current inventory will be available for a limited time before excess holdings are recycled.

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Western Bird Banding Association

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An important article was published recently by Erica Spotswood and several collaborators: "How safe is mist netting? Evaluating the risk of injury and mortality to birds*." Of course, all banders seek to reduce risk of bird injury and mortality towards zero. Regardless of the impact of banding-related accidents from a biological standpoint, they are of real personal consequence to the individual bander and individual birds. As you all know, the North American Banding Council has led the charge to provide tools, training, and evaluation methods to move individuals and banding stations as close as possible towards the zero goal.

Unintentional mortalities and injuries are inevitable with predators lurking in the background, and we must strive through training to balance any losses we cause with gains in scientific knowledge from banding. The days of ring-and-fling are long gone. Thanks to networks of stations like MAPS and LaMNA, and the high quality of data linked together, we are seeing new avenues of understanding opening up. The situation is now totally different than even a couple of decades ago, as molt is better understood, demographic tools are becoming widespread, and the acquisition of historical data is playing an increasing role in understanding long- term trends in demography and body condition.

Until recently, banders have been on the defensive, subject to criticism from anecdotal accounts from well-meaning critics who have either seen or heard tales of outliers among banders and banding experiences. While the critics are welcome to their own opinions, I would suggest not their own facts. In response to the need for hard facts regarding injury and mortality rates at banding stations, out of the west came Erica Spotswood from UC Berkeley. When denied a mist netting permit in French Polynesia, she decided to look critically at the relatively undocumented assurance from banders

that mortality was low, vanishingly low, and compared the evidence to the data-less claims of our critics. Nothing stifles discussion like data. Joining her were the accomplished cast of Gina G. Barton, Jay Carlisle, Renée L. Cormier, Kari Roesch Goodman, Susan L. Guers, Diana L. Humple, and Josée Rousseau.

Using data from 620,000 birds captured, from 22 organizations and individuals, they found that about one-quarter of one percent (0.23%) of the mist-netted birds died, and injuries brought the total to just above one-half of one percent. The injury and mortality were lower than many of us hoped and expected, and significantly lower than that encountered in studies of other groups of organisms, such as mammals, bats, and fish. Especially important, they confirmed that birds released with an injury were just as likely to be recaptured as uninjured birds, strong evidence that long-term impact of netting is minimal.

It is no accident that much of the biotic evidence for climate change comes from birds, as they are easily the best monitored biota on the planet. In meeting this critical need, we can expect scrutiny as we contribute high quality data to the debate and understanding of our changing environment.

When mortalities take place, it is important to preserve these few individuals as museum specimens. Today, more than ever, museums are in need of specimens to compare, for example, contaminants and body measurements with older specimens taken when most bird watching was done over the sights of a shotgun. We are all in the debt of all those who contributed their data to the final product.

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p.s. Thanks to Josée Rousseau, Walter Sakai, Erica Spotswood, and Jared Wolfe for comments

* Published in 2011 in the online journal of the British Ecological Society, "Methods in Ecology and Evolution". ***If you haven't read it yet, look online at http://www.prbo.org/refs/files/12125_Spotswood2011.pdf or http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-210X.2011.00123.x/full***

Erica Spotswood with a banding permit in hand, removing a Gray-green Fruit Dove in French Polynesia.