

2012

Recording Subspecies: A Finer Tuning of Data

C. John Ralph

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb>

Recommended Citation

Ralph, C. John (2012) "Recording Subspecies: A Finer Tuning of Data," *North American Bird Bander*. Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb/vol37/iss3/17>

This Western News is brought to you for free and open access by the Searchable Ornithological Research Archive at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in North American Bird Bander by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.



Founded in 1925

Western Regional News and Comments

Recording Subspecies: a Finer Tuning of Data.

As we know, it takes about 10,000 land birds banded to obtain one “foreign” recovery in North America (in Europe it is ‘only’ about 1,000). Most of us have come to understand that we do not monitor birds primarily to accumulate ends of migration of individuals, but to determine all the aspects of life history strategies. To attain this, the full spectrum of measurements and traits of all birds we capture is pretty much essential. In this process, it would be best to know the genetic basis of how these life history traits came about, within segments of populations, such as subspecies, or even smaller taxonomic units.

There was, to my mind, a certain amount of embarrassment when in 2009 we had the first accepted California record of the Winter Wren, a recently split species. In part this was because we have not been recording subspecies, morphs, and regional populations. While plumage differences may be subtle in the wren, there are consistent differences.

As we all strive to avoid the dreaded “ring and fling” syndrome, we know that we need to record, at the very least, the minimum data of species, age and sex. I propose we increase our precision markedly by using a non-traditional taxonomic unit (the “Group”) to help separate the breeding origins of various individuals we capture. The Group may combine similar subspecies as David Sibley, Peter Pyle, and others have done in their wonderful publications.

We already can distinguish for banding purposes many such separate genetic population units (usually, but not always, subspecies) because of substantial and consistent plumage differences and taxonomic precedent, such as the races of White-crowned Sparrow and flickers.

Distinctions can go both ways. Even some “good” species, like the Pacific-slope and Cordilleran flycatchers, are problematic, and thus especially non-breeding captures are usually most accurately designated as Western Flycatchers. Some species are even lumped despite good plumage criteria being usually applicable, such as Alder and Willow flycatchers that are sometimes termed Traill’s Flycatcher by even experienced banders.

Some of these proposed “Groups” are well recognized and largely easy to separate. These include the western and eastern populations of the Blue-gray Gnatcatchers; Marsh Wrens in the spring; the russet-backed and olive-backed groups of Swainson’s Thrush; the Pacific and taiga Orange-crowned Warblers; a combination of various subspecies of the Song Sparrow; and the thick-billed, sooty, red, and slate-colored Groups of the Fox Sparrows. eBird already allows observers to separate the Orange-crowned Warblers and Fox Sparrows. I suggest that, to be recorded, these Groups should have a substantial fraction of their population separable by plumage and morphology (e.g., >75%), noting that some clines are complex (e.g., Song Sparrow). By

necessity, some such Groups can include several recognized subspecies. New alpha codes could be used (e.g., Sooty Fox Sparrow [SFSP]), while others should be reassigned. For example, the Red Fox Sparrow of Sibley shares a common alpha code (RFSP) with the Red-faced Spinetail, so it could be the Northern Red (NRFS) of Pyle, or the Taiga Fox Sparrow (TFSP). It would be excellent if there was some way to assign a certainty to the identifications.

As we try to maximize the information that we take on each bird, to make their brief captivity have the most value for science and conservation, it will add greatly to our understanding of bird populations to record the potential origin of each individual we capture.

C. John Ralph

Arcata, CA

cjralph@humboldt1.com

p.s. Thanks to Wade Leitner, Carol Ralph, Josée Rousseau, and Walter Sakai for very helpful comments.

Western Bird Banding Association 2012 Annual Meeting Report

The 2012 annual meeting of the Western Bird Banding Association (WBBA) was held 22-24 Jun, jointly with Oregon Field Ornithologists (OFO), at the Running Y Ranch on the shores of Upper Klamath Lake in the beautiful Klamath Falls area of southern Oregon and northern California. The total number of registered attendees was approximately 64 hailing mostly from Oregon but also from California, Washington, Arizona, Utah, Mexico, Costa Rica, and the United Arab Emirates.

Friday's events began with mist netting at Klamath Bird Observatory Rocky Point Cabin site and a birding trip to Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. A workshop on NABC Banding curriculum was presented Friday afternoon. The annual WBBA board meeting was also held Friday afternoon.

On Friday evening a lively social and barbecue was held at the Running Y Ranch. Jaime Stephen's (from the Klamath Bird Observatory) presentation was on bird research and conservation efforts being done by the observatory in Pacific Northwest forests.

Saturday events included many birding opportunities to local hotspots.

The scientific session was held on Saturday at the Running Y Ranch. The sessions were attended by registered WBBA participants, student interns and a few guests. Fourteen interesting and informative presentations were given.

Also on Saturday, both WBBA and OFO held general membership meetings where the respective boards reported on the year's activities.

The Saturday evening banquet events were held at the Running Y. A competitive silent auction featuring books, T-shirts, and wildlife prints netted over \$800 which helps fund WBBA's research and monitoring grant program. Our keynote speaker was Rich Hoyer, Birding tour leader for Wings, who provided an interesting and informative presentation entitled, *Polyglottal Passerines – Mimicry is not just for Mockingbirds*, on the use of mimicry by many species of birds. Sunday events included another trip to the Rocky Point banding station and several all-day birding field trips.

The Grants Committee selected and the Board approved two recipients for this year's grant awards: **For Monitoring:** Luis Morales at San Pancho Bird Observatory: *Promoting economic and community development through bird conservation science, education and capacity building in Western Mexico*; and **for Research:** Carl Lundblad at the University of Arizona: *Elucidating the causes of partial migration in Yellow-eyed Junco using a marked population*.

WBBA continues to support the bird banding journal, *North American Bird Bander*, and encourages western area bird banders to submit articles for publication.

The membership voted in the 2012 slate of officers and board members:

Howard Browers - President
Renée Cormier - 1st Vice President
Wade Leitner - 2nd Vice President
C. John Ralph - Past President
Pat Leitner - Treasurer