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Net Sticks

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News, Notes, Comments

Net Sticks

When I started banding birds and learned how to set up a mist net, my master bander would simply pick up the nearest, straightest stick he could find nearby to push up the top trammel. When none lay around, we would simply break off a dead branch. This became an issue when we banded in more open habitats where shrubs were scarce. We would leave the branch nearby to use the next time, but they seem to get broken or lost.

I slowly began to reason that after a while, we would run out of such sticks. Since most of us are not in excess of 200 cm tall, these sticks were a necessary equipment for a bird bander. What was the solution? A moment of epiphany came one afternoon while putting around in my garage. An old wooden broomstick handle with a nail on the end. So began my effort to drive around my neighborhood on trash pick-up day looking for discarded broom sticks.

To “improve” my net sticks, I tried different size nails, different kinds of nails (e.g., roofing nails with large heads), and assorted screw (e.g., wood screws, drywall screws), reasoning that the threads would help hook the loops at the ends of the trammel lines. Painting them made them easier to find when left by a bush by a bander. My only concern now is that wooden broomstick handles are becoming an endangered species, replaced by metal handles. Heaven forbid that I would have to buy wooden dowels from Home Depot.

At Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, we try to adhere to the basic KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid) whenever possible. Our ‘net sticks’ are one example, with a basic design dating back many years. We use a ¾” (1.9 cm) x 4 ft (122 cm) wood dowel with a pipe clamp and washer screwed on to one end. There are dozens of styles of pipe clamps; some scouring through the local hardware store revealed that our clamp of choice is called a “1-hole tube strap [1” (2.54 cm)]”.

Legend has it that we started with just one stick and some reluctance as to how useful it would be. Early on, a banding volunteer promptly lost the stick at the start of a season. Charged with replacing it, he could only find an 8 ft (244 cm) dowel so he made two new sticks. Years later, the sticks have somehow continued to multiply and have become an indispensable part of our daily banding operations. Now, if we lose a stick, we put everyone walking the net lanes on alert until it is found!

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