

Reporting Banded Shorebirds: What You Can Do

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Getting Started

For a number of years now I have been regularly reporting banded shorebirds that I find during the late summer months. The most common occurrence in and around the Rhode Island area is Sanderlings that I find in August. I think that others may be interested in trying this as well, so here are some suggestions and tips for successfully finding and reporting banded shorebirds.

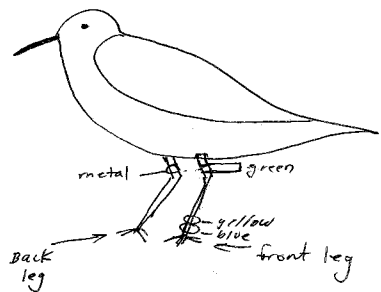
Plan to get to your coastal site early in the morning before people are running and letting their dogs loose on the beach. There is nothing more frustrating than finding a banded bird in a large flock and then having to relocate the subject bird because something spooked the whole flock. Lighting is also important. Try to have the sun behind you so you can clearly see the banding sequence. Sometimes small bands are hard to pick out, especially if they are covered with mud, so look carefully and make notes.

Usually, if I can find a very large flock of Sanderlings (say fifty or more birds), there is almost always at least one banded individual among them. Sometimes the group also contains Semipalmated Plovers, Least Sandpipers, and Black-bellied Plovers as well as scattered other species.

Careful Observation

Basically all you need are binoculars and a note pad, but you may find it useful to undertake this type of project with a partner. One person can call out the band data while the other records the information. Banded Sanderlings almost always have a flag on one of the upper legs. The flag sticks out like a sore thumb, and is your first clue that you found a banded individual. It is important to accurately record the location and color of the flag. Colors can vary, so try to distinguish between dark green, for example, and light or bright green. Also note where the flag is located, whether on the right or left upper leg or elsewhere on the leg. I often make a labeled sketch that I can refer to later in my notes (Figure 1).

Once you have a “flagged bird,” check both legs carefully for other bands. The bands can be on the tibia (upper leg) or the



August 24, 2001

East Matunuck Beach,

S. Kingstown, RI

9:00 AM

Sanderling basic plumage

Figure 1. Sanderling, Basic Plumage. August 24, 2001. East Matunuck Beach, South Kingstown, Rhode Island, 9:00 a.m.

tarsus (lower leg). As with the flags, it is very important to note the exact color and placement of the banding sequence. The bands are either variously colored plastic rings or stainless steel metal bands. Metal bands can also be aluminum. Sometimes even the UV-color-resistant bands fade or fall off, so not every banded bird can be connected with a bird bander. Depending on how a bird is standing, you might not see a band if it is just above the foot, so check and re-check each bird that you find. The bands, especially those on the lower leg, often have mud or dirt on them which obscures the color. Some plastic bands appear to be larger and wrapped around the leg. These are called “spiral bands,” and it is important to note their location. I also record the plumage of the bird and any other distinguishing marks. Once I have checked a flock for banded birds, I count them and record how many birds of each kind were in the group. If I wasn’t able to check the entire flock, I make a note of that.

I often find banded shorebirds at East Matunuck State Beach in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, as well as at Second Beach in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Anywhere large concentrations of shorebirds show up is a possibility. In addition to Sanderlings, check Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, and Semipalmated Sandpipers for possible bands.

Sample Report

A typical report of mine might look like this:

Banded birds seen on August 29, 2004
Sunday, East Matunuck Beach, South Kingstown, RI
1:00 p.m., 10-power binoculars

Group of 25 Sanderlings, 10 Semipalmated Plovers

Bird #1: Basic Plumage Sanderling
Left Tibia: bright green flag
Left Tarsus: green band on top of yellow band
Right Tibia: metal band
Right Tarsus: dark green band

As noted above, it is important to report carefully what color bands are on top of what other colored bands. The sequence is recorded by the bander, and from this you can often find where and when the bird was banded. Once in a while the bands may have numbers or letters on them. If you can see these well enough to record them, that will be a plus, but do not give up if you cannot get these data. Some of the information that I have received back indicates that the Sanderlings I reported were banded in May 2002 and 2004 on the New Jersey shore of Delaware Bay. The birds are often banded as part of a study to determine migration routes and body condition of shorebirds stopping over at various coastal locations. For Delaware Bay, scientists from New Jersey and Delaware have banded well over 25,000 shorebirds in the area since 1997.

Where to Report Your Findings

Every birder can make important additions to the ongoing studies of migration, nesting, and wintering areas. Though there may often be little variety of birds on the beach, even a flock of Sanderlings provides one with an opportunity to make a contribution to the store of shorebird data. Below are some places to which you can report your findings.

The Pan American Shorebird Program (PASP) was created in the mid-1980s to develop a standardized bird-banding system for shorebirds. It coordinates the color markings in the Americas and connects observers of marked shorebirds with the banders of those birds. It is the program to which colored shorebird bands should be reported. The following links are of interest:

<http://www.mb.ec.ca/nature/migratorybirds/pasp/index.en.html> (Home page)


<http://www.mb.ec.gc.ca/nature/migratorybirds/pasp/dc29s01.en.html> (Reporting instructions)

<http://www.mb.ec.gc.ca/nature/migratorybirds/pasp/contact-contactez/contact> (Electronic submission forms)

You can also surface mail data on color-banded shorebirds in North America to Dr. C. L. Gratto-Trevor, Research Scientist, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada Prairie and Northern Region, 115 Perimeter Road, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X4, Canada, or email: cheri.gratto-trevor@ec.gc.ca. Dr. Cheri Gratto-Trevor is the coordinator of PASP.

I send all of my shorebird reports to PASP, and they have emailed me the results of my findings once they have examined the data. The time to get a report back varies between a few weeks to more than a month. This web site will also provide you with any details you need to know about the bands, how to report them, and how to record the data, and it includes photographs of banded shorebirds as well.

If you actually find a numbered, metal, federal band, or a dead bird with a band on it, you can call your data in to the Patuxent Bird Band Laboratory at 1-800-327-BAND or FAX: 301-497-5717. These bands are recorded usually for larger game birds such as ducks and geese. This is connected to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (PWCR), established in 1936 as part of the United States Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Service. Its website <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/> also has a large amount of information on bird banding and banded birds, and electronic reports can be made here as well.

You too can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of shorebird behavior and their survival with a little time and patience. Give it a try this summer! 

Alan Strauss is the President of Cultural Resource Specialists of New England, an archaeology consulting firm. He is a resident of Providence, Rhode Island, who has been birding seriously since 1976. He has found state record birds for Maine and Rhode Island and has contributed several previous articles to Bird Observer.