

PROPOSED MODIFICATIONS OF AGE AND SEX REPORTING
A Letter to the Banding Office
By Robert L. Pyle

Mr. Allen J. Duvall
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Dear Mr. Duvall:

While working on schedules for the past year's bandings, I have once again been wrestling with the perennial problem of how to report the age and sex of many of my newly banded birds. Sometimes it is not clear what designations should be entered on the schedule to convey what I, as an untrained amateur, have determined about the individual bird, yet not mislead the future user of my records as to the extent of the scientific basis for my determinations. The present reportable categories of Age and Sex as defined in the current Bird Banding Manual are not fully explicit.

For Age, the main problem is in deciding between ADULT and UNKNOWN. The Manual states that for "some species" both subadults and true adults "should be called adults after their first January 1". It is therefore common practice for amateurs to designate virtually all birds banded from January through early spring as adults. This designation says only that the bird is at least a few months old, which adds nothing to the information given by the date of banding. But a trained zoologist in the same situation may determine from skull conditions, feather wear, or other subtle criteria that his bird was not hatched in the most recent nesting season, and therefore is at least one and a fraction years old and perhaps older. He must use the same "A" designation and, unless special remarks are given, his added information is lost to the future user of the data.

The Manual goes on to point out that subadult towhees can be distinguished from adults on the basis of feather wear and eye color, implying that towhees banded after January 1 should be designated Age Unknown unless this distinction is made. Other species must also have such criteria for separating adults from subadults in late winter. For these species, banders who indiscriminately report "A" after January 1 are actually spoiling the data files for users who would like to distinguish between subadults and true adults whenever the original bander has been able to do so.

The Age classifications ought to be so defined that the amateur and professional banders each can report as much information as he has determined. They should clearly indicate to the data user whether age was

directly and positively determined from the bird, or whether it was derived indirectly from date of banding alone.

In designating Sex, a problem arises in autumn when individuals of some species are definitely not adult male, but could be adult female or immature. The possibility of their being either adult female or immature male now requires that we designate both age and sex as unknown. In order not to lose information actually known about such a bird, we need another sex category for "female or immature, but not adult male".

With these considerations in mind, I would like to propose the following modifications to the present definitions of age and sex used for newly banded birds and for return reports:

AGE

- A = Adult: Birds determined not to have hatched in same calendar year as banded. Hatched in preceding year, or earlier.
- U = Unknown: could be A or I, but not L or N.
- = Unknown: could be A, I, L or N (for cases where age data is lost or not recorded)

It is expected that for many banders these categories plus the present N(nestling), L(local) and I(immature) would suffice for most species. But when date of banding can be supplemented with morphological criteria to determine age more accurately than indicated by "A", the following additional categories would be available:

- S = Subadult: birds determined to have hatched in the year preceding the calendar year of banding. Also, may be used for birds possibly hatched two, three or more years back, but which have not yet reached full adult plumage. Additional notation could be given if it can be determined fairly definitely that the bird is in its 2nd year, 3rd year, etc.
- E = Elder: birds in full adult plumage determined to have hatched in second year prior to calendar year of banding, or earlier.

When S or E is reported, the criteria used should be indicated in Remarks.

For birds hatching in late fall or winter before January 1, the following definitions would be more appropriate:

- I = Immature: determined to be less than one year old.

- A = Adult: determined to be about one year old, or older.
- S = Subadult: determined to be more than one year old, but less than two years old, or not yet in full adult plumage.
- E = Elder: determined to be about two years old, or older, and in full adult plumage.

(It is appealing to consider using these definitions for all species, thus avoiding entirely the artificial January 1 cutoff date).

SEX

Add the category FI: Female or immature, but not adult male. With this sex designation, use U for age.

These proposed modifications elaborate on the present classification given in the Manual, but with as little change as possible so as to cause minimal disturbance to the present practices of most banders, and to preserve as far as possible the real meanings of age and sex designations already in the files.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts and comments on the proposed modifications and on the subject in general. I am sending copies of this letter to the various regional banding associations in hopes of stimulating discussion and eliciting other suggestions on this topic.

Yours truly,

Robert L. Pyle, 3012 44th St., N.W., Washington 16, D.C.

(The Editor will be happy to receive and print thoughts and comments of EBBA News readers on these proposals.)



SHOULD BANDERS
COLLECT BIRDS?
Nabel Gillespie
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I think it was Leroy Wilcox who, during the showing of slides Friday evening (at the Annual Meeting), projected a picture of a controversial sparrow, probably a hybrid. He kept asking, "Do you think I should have collected it?" This reminded me of an experience years ago. My husband was off with friends on a Sunday and I was confined with two measles cases. I had one trap operating and in the course of events caught a White-winged Junco. I drew pictures and wrote detailed descriptions, banded and released the bird. Next day I checked bird skins at the Academy of Natural Sciences. But do you think I could get this published? I should have collected the bird. Now I ask you, what right has an ordinary bander to collect anything? I would like to have some discussion on this point.