

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF AN AVERAGE BANDER; ISLAND BEACH,
NEW JERSEY, OPERATION RECOVERY

By James B. Hallett

(Author's note: If you detect a tinge of awe in the notes below, it is honest. For $6\frac{1}{2}$ days, from 22 to 28 September 1963, I watched and listened to the "pros." I think any average bander would use the same term, although it seems to embarrass them. To the "pros," these notes will seem like first-day kindergarten. To other average banders, I can report a resolve to study, identify, weigh, measure and record in greater detail and with greater accuracy so that the "pros" can better advance ornithology beyond, what they tell me, is truly infancy.)

There are 9 confusing fall warblers illustrated on page 194 of the Peterson Guide. Most of us have netted one or more at a time and then with great agony resolved on a tremulous identification. How would you like to have the whole page in one holding cage for comparison--alive? How about Yellow-throated, Blue-headed, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireos peering contiguously and simultaneously back at you from less than two feet? Plus Black-throated Blue, Tennessee, Nashville, Canada, Cape May, Bay-breasted, etc., etc. Throw in a Pigeon Hawk, a King Rail, a Whip-poor-will, Red-backed Sandpipers, Wilson Snipe and Grasshopper Sparrows, and I am sure you are interested even if you have never banded one bird.

My IBOR schedule for 6 days was: Up at 6:00 AM and drive to one of the dozen net lanes crossing the island, arriving about 15 minutes after sunup. On the 23rd, my first full day, 1225 birds were banded. On the 24th of September, just after dawn and at the second check around 8:00 AM - in just one lane of about 10 nets where I helped - there were in the nets Flickers, Crested Flycatchers, Redstarts, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Waxwings, Towhees, Song Sparrows, Magnolia and Cape May Warblers, Indigo Buntings and Juncos.

I'd help with the nets wherever needed, then return to Headquarters with the banders and their various kinds of holding cages - from ingenious racks of milk containers to huge 30-compartment cages with plexiglas doors on fiberglass-tape hinges.

I soon learned that the time when I could help the most and learn the most began when I returned to Headquarters around 7:30 AM and left around 7:00 PM, after the last net-check.

"Bert of Bound Brook," a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan, was working on an American Museum of Natural History project to determine whether age and sex make a difference in migration time and place. If someone such as I recorded the data as he ascertained it from each bird examined, then he could "process" a bird in about 50 seconds; 20 seconds without weighing. If he had to make his own notes, his "processing time" doubled or trebled. He was especially interested in

Black-poll Warblers (see Bird-Banding: Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, July, 1963) and Red-breasted Nuthatches, plus any rarities. I was interested to learn that few other "Operations" in North America had or would publish complete data of the type Bert was gaining.

At any rate, my notes would read something like this for each of 465, 431, 308, 218, 465 and 430 birds which Bert "processed" from an average of 44 species on the six successive days I took notes:

"Dickerson 317 RNUT SNO ♂ 65 0/- 10.2"

Translated, this meant that the holding cage, and there were sometimes 10 or more lined up, belonged to Elise Dickerson. "317" represented the last 3 numbers of the band she had already put on the bird and recorded in her own notes on the elaborate daily summaries by species, time of capture, net hours, etc.

"RNUT" is, of course, a shorty for Red-breasted Nuthatch. "SNO" means "skull not ossified," i.e. an immature bird, which fact Bert determined by wetting the skull feathers so that the skull itself was exposed in strong light. Sex was determined from plumage if possible, except for thrushes, etc., where it is impossible, but sometimes from wing measurements. "65" was the wing length over the chord in millimeters (not inches) and was taken with an accurate metal ruler and not, Heaven forbid!, with an inaccurate plastic one.

"0" was the fat class obtained by blowing back the feathers on the lower throat and flanks. "/-" meant a minus for no signs of molt, whereas "/PST" meant that there were sheaths on the primaries, secondaries and tail.

Finally, the "10.2" meant grammes of weight in the metric scale, not ounces and grains. Each bird was placed head first into a cone (the center of a twine holder in any butcher shop) and the cone placed on a triple-beam Ohaus scale with a tare bar, maximum capacity 2610 grams. Nuthatches can climb back out of the cone as readily as stay quietly inside when they are weighed. This explained the presence of several butterfly nets in the room where we worked. A good $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of sand on the floor and feathers from a 100 species completed the picture.

Every once in a while, Bert or someone else would whirl toward me with a bird held by the tibia and say, "What's that?" You can imagine some of the answers they got, but gradually my personal notes grew to include such gems as:

"Black-poll - black streaks on rump mean male."

"Black-throated Blue - if little feather (alula) on wing is green,
then immature male."

"Junco - male if wing is over 75 mm.

- immature if eye is light grey (even at front late in year) with dark pupil."

"Tennessee - female has green back color, like Ch-sided"
"Towhee - immature male - even when eye turns red, brown
covert means immature"

Once, I soared to glory and identified a Grasshopper Sparrow by pure instinct. For some reason, the outline of its head always reminded me of a Canvasback!

You can see now what I mean by all page 194 in one holding cage before me; having 44 species in the hand in one day; watching preparation of study skins of the very few casualties, mostly those struck at night by the cars of surf-fishermen.

Recommendations for other average banders? Naturally, many, some with strict conditions:

1. Get permission to come for at least a week, without your bands, nets and traps. Incompetent or overly independent banders and garrulous visitors are a nuisance, and detract seriously from the long-range mission which is accurate, detailed, credible, coordinated information. Advance permission will equip you with information of the area; park entry permits; placards for your car; and a warm friendly welcome.
2. Bring your Peterson, Roberts and the rest of your library; your own car, if possible; your camera; a clipboard; boots; a flashlight as well as a head lamp; mosquito dope; clothes for warm as well as cold, damp weather; rain gear and every holding cage you can get your hands on, but none through which circulation of air is prevented or poor.
3. Trip up your best friend so as to be a recorder for a "pro," whether he or she is primarily a "netter-bander" or a "processor." There seems to be a real need here. At any rate, be prepared to learn more about more species than you ever had in hand before; the winds that bring the flights; net poles and mass mist-netting techniques and types of holding cages; yet be ready to defend your own methods because everyone will disagree with you and with each other!
4. Look forward to meeting and getting on a first-name basis with your teachers, thanked herewith in alphabetical order: Bruce Adams; Walter and Peggy Bigger; Dorothy Bordner; Tom Crebbs; Elise Dickerson; Frank Frazier; Ron French; Gale Goldbeck; John Greenlaw; Fran Hornick; Carol and John Logan; Ray Margerum; Fred Mears; Soonja and John Miller; Bert Murray; Jeff Swinebroad; Charl and Mabel Warburton; and Don Wilkins.

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