

OPERATION: RECOVERY OF HOME STATIONS
By Betty Knorr

Introduction

For the past two years EBBA's editor has been prodding me to write another article on my Operation Recovery-Home Station. Somehow I just couldn't get enthusiastic about it because I felt it would be repetitious and take up space that could be better utilized for more interesting articles by other banders.

While O. R. stations are important and of interest to many banders, particularly those who band at such stations, the descriptions of fabulous flights and mouth-watering rarities offer little encouragement or incentive for the many banders who must stay at home. With this thought in mind, I'd like to change the original theme of this article to Operation: Recovery of Home Stations.

Nowadays, the small backyard banding station somehow seems to be considered old fashioned and unimportant. Even though the modern ultra-scientific approach with highly technical and specialized skills and equipment is recognized as the current standard, it does not necessarily mean that the home station is obsolete. Far from it! Being a confirmed stay-at-home bander, I'd like to see a revival and rejuvenation of home stations. I hope a few of my own experiences will give other banders some incentive to join me in Operation: Recovery of Home Stations.

Making a good start

The first step is to make an honest appraisal of the home station and yourself. Consider your available time, money, energy, and health. Your talents and interests are more important than the size and location of your station. Keeping these few important things in mind will help in planning what to do and how to do it.

Both Mabel Gillespie and Alex Bergstrom have recently written excellent papers on suitable projects for banders. (See EBBA News, Vol. 26, No. 5 and Vol. 27, No. 1.) These two experienced banders offer some very sound advice and the results of some of my own banding projects confirm the things they advocate.

Banding projects should be properly geared to each individual or they may be doomed before they are started. A recent paper in another publication suggested that all banders establish a regular trapping routine and set-up which, once established, should never be changed in any way. The trap that catches no birds should not be moved one millimeter. That trap produces valuable negative statistics! Valuable negative statistics? Yes, for the scientific bander equipped with enough time and assistants and a few mathematical experts. For the

average bander, however, this procedure is not at all practical. Worthwhile results can still be achieved by working on projects that do not require such critical regulation.

The backyard bander should leave the ultra-scientific projects to the scientists. In other words, if one is a plumber, it's far better to be a good plumber than attempt to be a brain surgeon and bungle the job. Many banding projects have died on the vine because they were not originally suited to the abilities, interests, and facilities of the banders involved.

The importance of gearing projects to species that are readily available and easy to catch cannot be overemphasized. The bander who ignores the hordes of lowly Starlings he could easily catch just because he would rather band more esthetic species which may be few and far between, is passing up a golden opportunity. The "bums" of the bird world produce much more usable data.

The "bums" at my station are Brown-headed Cowbirds, and even though it will probably be a long time before I have sufficient data to attempt a paper on this species, the simple statistics in Table #1 and #2 indicate the possibilities. The recoveries, when charted on a map, are especially interesting. Unfortunately, the large number and wide range of the recoveries are difficult to present on a small map. It might be noted, however, that the most distant Cowbird recovery I've received to date was one from a small island of Newfoundland, off the coast of Labrador.

Table #1

Yearly record of Brown-headed Cowbirds

Year	Number Banded	Number Returned	Number Recovered	Number of Foreign Retraps
1957	251	0	0	4
1958	708	0	9	3
1959	49	0	5	0
1960	342	1	3	2
1961	5169	10	12	17
1962	5055	56	48	14
1963	4278	51	51	8
1964	4441	48	55	13
TOTALS	20,293	166	183	61

Table #2

Location of recoveries and foreign retraps of Brown-headed Cowbirds and numbers of Cowbirds trapped and released by other banders

Location	Number Recovered	Trapped & Released	Foreign Retraps
CANADA			
Newfoundland	2	0	0
New Brunswick	13	1	1
Anticosti Island	2	0	0
Quebec	4	0	0
UNITED STATES			
Maine	14	8	3
New Hampshire	4	1	1
Vermont	2	0	0
Massachusetts	10	6	5
Connecticut	5	1	5
Rhode Island	0	0	1
New York	13	0	1
New Jersey	69	8	17
Pennsylvania	7	4	1
Delaware	33	30	14
Maryland	3	2	0
Virginia	0	0	1
North Carolina	1	0	0
South Carolina	1	0	0
Reports not yet rec'd			11
TOTALS	183	61	61

Another one of my home station projects that is starting to produce results is shorebird banding. With the exception of Woodcock, there are no other nesting shorebirds in my area, and all of the ones that occur here are strictly brief transients. Considering this fact, the returns that I'm getting on these shorebirds are noteworthy. With one exception, all of the returns listed are of species which do not nest south of the Canadian border. The Spotted Sandpiper does nest in New Jersey, but not in my local banding area.

In addition to the returns I've also captured 3 Semipalmated Sandpipers that were banded elsewhere. One came from Ontario, Canada, and another from Ocean City, Maryland. Details of the third foreign retrap are still lacking due to the illegibility of the worn band. The most interesting shorebird recovery I've received was that of a Semipalmated Plover which I banded on August 1, 1963. This Plover was reported shot on September 6, 1964, on the French island of Martinique, off the coast of South America.

Attracting the birds

Getting back to the subject of more relevant things, perhaps the most frequently heard problem of home station banders concerns the lack of birds. If this is the problem, it's time to go out into the yard and take a birds-eye view of the situation. Why isn't the area attractive to birds? What can be done to improve it? In most cases the area can be made more inviting to birds with a minimum amount of work and expense.

Before moving to our present home we lived in a rented house in a congested area of Union, N. J. The backyard measured 20' X 20' and the largest piece of vegetation was a scrawny rose bush. Nevertheless, in that unlikely place I banded many birds, including a variety of warblers, thrushes, sparrows, and kinglets. This area also produced the first known nesting record of the House Finch in New Jersey. (See EBBA News Vol. 25, No. 4.)

So if your home station seems hopeless, take heart. Things may not be as bad as they seem. After an evaluation of the area has been made, the next step is to work out a plan. Careful planning can help keep the expense and work involved to a minimum.

One of the things I have found to be particularly useful is a book by Margaret McKenny, "Birds in the Garden and How to Attract Them." (University of Minnesota Press) This unique book has a gold mine of

Table #3

Shorebirds Banded

Species	1961	1962	1963	1964	Totals
Semipalmated Plover	5	25	20	14	64
Black-bellied Plover			1	1	2
Ruddy Turnstone		29	8	12	49
American Woodcock	4	3	2	3	12
Spotted Sandpiper		5	8	6	19
Greater Yellowlegs		1			1
Knot		1		1	2
Least Sandpiper		13	18	26	57
Dunlin		2		1	3
Short-billed Dowitcher			1		1
Semipalm. Sandpiper	25	485	433	646	1589
Western Sandpiper		6	6	2	14
Sanderling		69	29	91	189
TOTALS	34	639	526	803	2,002

Table #4

Returns of transient shorebirds

Band Number	Species	Date Banded	Date Returned
61-01133	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/16/61	8/11/62
63-64454	Semipalm. Sandpiper	6/2/62	5/24/64
63-64468	Semipalm. Sandpiper	7/20/62	8/19/63
26-135315	Spotted Sandpiper	7/28/62	8/5/63
63-64209	Semipalm. Sandpiper	7/29/62	8/3/63
63-64216	Semipalm. Sandpiper	7/29/62	8/13/63
26-135320	Semipalmated Plover	8/4/62	8/4/64
63-64290	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/5/62	8/5/64
61-01324	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/11/62	7/22/64
61-01343	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/11/62	5/24/64
61-01358	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/11/62	7/30/63
62-138523	Sanderling	8/16/62	9/4/64
65-23312	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/16/62	7/30/63
65-23325	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/16/62	8/16/63
65-23352	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/25/62	8/10/63
65-23395	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/30/62	8/22/63
65-23409	Semipalm. Sandpiper	9/3/62	8/16/63
65-23590	Least Sandpiper	7/17/63	7/21/64
65-23674	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/2/63	8/9/64
65-23682	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/2/63	8/4/64
65-23769	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/9/63	8/17/64
65-23780	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/10/63	9/4/64
70-45019	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/16/63	9/4/64
70-45037	Semipalm. Sandpiper	8/17/63	8/5/64

information that can be extremely useful to banders. The amazing list of birds attracted to tiny yards and roof top gardens in the heart of New York City should give hope to any discouraged bander.

Since much of the success of attracting birds depends on the existing vegetation, this thought should be one of the first to consider. By keeping one jump ahead of the local bulldozers, banders can often salvage valuable native small trees and shrubs that are doomed for destruction. For those operating on a limited budget, this idea should not be overlooked.

Even the smallest yard will benefit by the planting of a few Pokeberries and Sunflowers. The dwarf varieties of Sunflowers are well suited to small areas and are just as attractive to the birds. Careful planning and planting can create a combination of varied habitats even in a small area. Banders who have more space should elaborate on a

planting plan. If a net lane cannot be established along suitable existing vegetation, strategic planting along the available netting site can accomplish wonders. At my own station I have tripled my catch of certain species simply by planting a few appropriate berry-bearing shrubs along my net lane. For stations that have tall trees, suitable shrubs coupled with a water drip will bring the treetop species down to the nets or into traps.

Station maintenance

The problem of maintenance plays an important part in successful home station banding and as a general rule, simplicity is often the easiest way to achieve results. Time consuming maintenance traps more banders than birds.

Concerning traps, some home stations are so cluttered up with empty-nine traps that the bander has to develop his own version of the "Twist" in order to check his trap line and come out unscathed. While such stations may catch a lot of birds, the gymnastic routine is rather strenuous and comparable results can be achieved with much less effort.

At my own station I rarely use more than two traps. Both of these are small wire pull string traps placed on the ground. Instead of using prop sticks, which are a nuisance and may cause injury to the



"Ozzie" the Osprey

birds, the string is fastened to the door of the trap, passed through a window, and hooked onto a nail by tying a loop in the string. By keeping the string taut, the door of the trap is open. Releasing the string closes the trap door. Several loops spaced about an inch apart in the string will allow for any adjustment due to stretching or shrinking of the string. Heavy-duty twine should be used as ordinary string wears quickly and may break.

By always keeping the doors of these traps open the traps are constantly serving as feeders. The wire construction of these traps makes the bait easily visible and the wide doors provide easy access for the birds. Concentrating the bait in a small area means that the birds must come to that area for food and water. Bait distributed over a wide area will also distribute the birds over a wide area. The effectiveness of this principal takes a bit more time to get results, but once established, the steady stream of resident birds act as excellent decoys to bring in the migrating birds.

This idea may not be quite as effective as widely distributed bait and traps, but it will catch a lot of birds with only a small fraction of the work involved in maintaining a long trap line. There is also less chance of vandalism and such a set-up is more economical. The cost of buying or making traps for a long trap line is expensive. By limiting the bait to a small area there is no waste due to spoilage and as all of the bait is eaten, no time and effort are wasted in removing uneaten seed that has sprouted.

By varying the bait with the species and the season, a wide variety of species can be caught in pull-string traps. For best results, the traps should be in an open area where they are easily visible and with some shrubs or other vegetation nearby. Suggested baits include: mixed bird seed, sunflower, bread, suet, berries and other fruit, and a water drip. During the nesting season egg shells, a pan of mud, and various nesting materials are very effective. Egg shells are an excellent bait and cost nothing. At my station Robins are never bothered by egg stealing Blue Jays because the Blue Jays are always at my traps gorging as much egg shell as they can get. At the peak of the season when the demand exceeds the supply, my neighbors save their egg shells for me.

While Blue Jays and Grackles are the main egg shell customers, many other species will also eagerly accept egg shells. Some prefer the shells to be coarsely crushed whereas Mourning Doves and Purple Martins like finely crushed shells.

Pull-string traps have a number of advantages. They are always open for business and trapping can be done whenever it's convenient. I have caught several rarities with these traps which I probably would not have caught with the automatic traps. On November 12, 1964, a few resident free-loaders lured a rare Yellow-headed Blackbird into one of

these two traps. If I had had to go out to set a bunch of traps, the bird probably would have been scared away. Many banders have had the experience of eagerly watching an unusual bird come to their automatic Potters, top-openers, and trip-step traps only to have a trap-happy Chickadee spring the last available compartment!

Another advantage of these traps is selective trapping. Unless many repeats are desirable for a particular study, much wear and tear on both the birds and the banders can be avoided. If many repeats are wanted, these traps will also do the job with a minimum amount of effort. With gregarious species it is frequently possible to catch whole flocks with one fell swoop. During the busy Cowbird season I often catch 75 or more of them at a time.

With the exception of the shorebirds and a few birds of prey, almost all of the other birds I band are caught within 200' of our house. During the winter I do check a short Hawk and Owl route, but I have also caught a number of these species right by the house. By carefully planning and planting my permanent net lane, on a slow day it takes approximately 3 minutes to check all of my nets and traps. This simplified set-up is easy to maintain and I rarely ever get any injured or dead birds. Last year I banded more than 7,000 birds of 106 species, which is not bad for a lazy stay-at-home bander operating in such a small area.

The most important project of all

When considering a banding project, don't overlook the most important project of all. That project is conservation and the home station bander can really shine in this field. All banders believe in conservation, but not many do very much about it. Will your favorite banding spot still be there next year or 5 years from now? Or will it become a housing development or a used car lot? Nowadays even the smallest vacant lot is eyed as some kind of a potential tax ratable.

What can a lone bander do about such unfortunate situations? In some cases, nothing. In other cases, he can do something. And in a few cases, a persistent bander can accomplish small miracles. First of all, make your presence known. An appropriate banding station sign can do wonders. (See EBBA News Vol. 25, No. 2.) Such a sign can quickly change your reputation from that of a crackpot or "bird watching nut" to something more dignified and respectable. While few of us are able to launch large scale projects, we can all accomplish something worthwhile in our own areas.

Starting with the immediate neighborhood, take the time to talk to the local children and neighbors. Explain what you are doing and why. Teach the children to value and respect birds. This, perhaps, may be the very small beginning of your conservation project.

As the word gets around town, the local scout troop will probably ask you to speak at one of their meetings. Even though you may not really want to, force yourself! At my first such "lecture" I was so nervous I thought I would surely make a fool of myself. It was Parents Night, and as soon as I saw all of those eyes glaring at me I promptly forgot everything I had planned to say. Finally out of desperation, I managed to say "Well, since I've been asked to talk about birds, what would you like to know about birds?" Immediately seventeen hands shot up. After that I was so busy answering an endless stream of questions that my nervousness completely vanished. I not only found myself answering simple bird questions, but suddenly I was also tossing in all sorts of conservation tidbits. The economic value of birds naturally goes hand in hand with subjects such as indiscriminate use of pesticides, water pollution, erosion control, the need for parks and recreation areas, illegal hunting, etc...

At the end of the program many of the parents came up to thank me for giving such a wonderful lecture. Lecture? I had completely forgotten about my "lecture!" All I did was answer simple questions and it was a tremendous success. After that, I was automatically considered as a consultant for conservation and nature subjects. Local organizations sought my advice. The County Park Commission asked for my assistance and opinions and I was launched into a number of worthwhile conservation projects.

One such project was the woods across the street from our house. This 10.6 acre parcel of land directly borders the Nature Study and Wilderness area of Cheesequake State Park. It contains many rare and unusual plants and a fresh water swamp in the middle accomodates an abundance of varied wildlife. This land was up for sale and several potential buyers had plans to build garden apartments on this site. Anxious for tax ratables, the local people felt no qualms about having this beautiful area destroyed. Since the State Park consisted of 1,000 acres, they considered this 10 acre parcel was negligible. They felt they need tax ratables more than they needed another 10 acres of woods.

I wrote letters to state officials and many individuals hoping that the state would acquire this land as it was contiguous to the State Park. The state wasn't interested. I didn't give up, however,



Slaughter in the suburbs and this majestic monarch rules the sky no more.
(Adult female Peregrine)



A Red-throated Loon smiles after a quick treatment and cure at the Bird "Band-aid" Station.



A two year struggle saved the woods in the background for future Scouts and children to enjoy.



and finally after a two year struggle I convinced the state that they would lose something they already own if they didn't acquire that land. By constructing apartments on land that directly borders the Wilderness area of the park, slowly but surely the Wilderness would be ruined. The wild orchids and other rare plants would be trampled, the birches would be stripped, debris would fill the swamp, and the beauty that now exists would be gone forever.

By doing a bit of fast talking, I was able to persuade the owner of this land to give the state first preference to buy it. As time dragged on, persuading the owner got to be more difficult, but now it is comforting to know that this lovely spot will remain unspoiled for future generations to enjoy. Along with the fight to save the Wilderness area, I also kept hounding the state to acquire the rest of the marsh that borders the State Park. Fortunately, I was not alone in this cause as the acquisition of wetlands does have some priority.

One of the happiest days of my life was the day state officials came to our home and told us that the state not only planned to buy the woods adjacent to the Wilderness area but the state was also going to purchase an additional 2,000 acres which would be added to the existing 1,000 acres of Cheesequake State Park! All of the marsh will be saved!

Most conservation projects are not so dramatic and involved as those that concern the acquisition of land. Actually, some projects are so simple that all that is necessary may be a single phone call. But if no one makes that necessary phone call, another opportunity may go down the drain. For example, during the past few years I have come across a number of nesting Bank Swallow colonies that were being destroyed by sand and gravel companies. A combined total of at least 2,000 Bank Swallows were destroyed as the machines dug in for the fill dirt they planned to sell. I immediately contacted the owners of the companies and by stressing the economic value of these birds, further digging was directed to other areas until the Swallows had finished nesting for the season.

Another very simple project a bander can do is to talk to the local Shade Tree Commission. Unfortunately, much of the annual pruning of trees along municipal streets is done in the spring. Most of these tree trimmers do not look for nests before they start to trim unless someone alerts them and instructs them to do so. When dead and dying trees are cut down, hole-nesting species also suffer considerable losses. Two years ago a dead tree was cut down in a nearby town. Someone discovered two baby birds in a hole of this tree and fortunately the nestlings were taken to the local S.P.C.A. No one knew what kind of birds they were or what to do with them. Luckily, the Game Warden happened to stop in at the animal shelter and he brought the nestlings to me.

I was surprised when I opened the box and saw two round helpless bundles of fluff. They were baby Screech Owls, not much more than a

week old. The smallest owlet was very weak, and I did not expect it to live. However, I always keep a supply of various types of bird food on hand for emergencies and quickly thawed some frozen raw beef heart. After force feeding these two little gluttons until I had finally filled their seemingly bottomless pits, they promptly fell asleep, flat on their stomachs. Now, almost two years later, these two Owls are always the star attraction of my nature and conservation programs.

One person all banders should get to know is the local Game Warden. In our area shorebirds were killed by the thousands, and every Hawk was considered a "chicken hawk" and promptly shot, despite state laws that protect all birds of prey. Some local gunners even had a contest to see who could shoot the most Owls. By working closely with the Game Warden many violators have been arrested and fined that would not have been caught otherwise. One man was caught in the act of shooting a magnificent Peregrine Falcon along with several other birds. Our home movies and the dead birds went to court and successfully convicted this violator. Luckily the Peregrine was shot clean and was made into a fine mounted specimen.

Shortly after that incident, the Game Warden brought me an adult Osprey that was near death. By some miracle the Osprey survived the first crucial days and after several weeks was completely recovered. When "Ozzie" decided it was time to go, we exchanged farewells, and I took movies of his departure. On powerful wings he climbed higher and higher, heading straight for the marsh and out of sight. The next day, however, some excited children came to the house with a burlap bag. Inside the bag was my beloved Ozzie. Shot.....

Not all events are so tragic though and some are even amusing. Many of the children who have difficulty pronouncing the K in my name simply refer to me as the Bird Lady, but recently I was surprised to find out that the smaller children always refer to my home as the Bird "Band-aid" Station! These youngsters recently brought me a Red-throated Loon which they had found down the road in the creek. The Loon had gotten tangled in some fishing line and after removing the line, I immediately released the bird. He swam and bathed happily, diving now and then, obviously glad to be untangled and free.

By working with local organizations, the home station bander can often get cooperation for many conservation projects. As a nature and conservation counselor for both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, I have supervised a number of such activities, including considerable work in Cheesequake State Park. The Scouts planted several thousand trees, cleared nature trails and a campsite, built and erected many Bluebird houses, and numerous other projects.

Sometimes a worthwhile project just sort of happens. A few weeks ago I was asked to have an exhibit at a Scoutorama, and though I agreed,

I didn't have anything particular in mind at the time. The next day I accidentally discovered my exhibit. On a Hawk banding jaunt at nearby Baritan Arsenal I flushed a Snowy Owl from the top of an abandoned observation tower. I climbed the tower and was amazed to find that the entire floor was covered with countless owl pellets. Close inspection revealed that all the pellets contained only the fur and bones of rats and mice. Here was my exhibit for the Scoutorama!

In the center of a large blackboard I taped an Audubon Society poster titled "Hawks and Owls Are Our Friends." Around this poster I taped up a number of the spectacular photographs of birds of prey by Don Bleitz. Some of these extraordinary photographs depict the birds with rats and mice in their clutches. Next to the blackboard I placed a large explanatory placard which I printed about owl and hawk pellets. In front of the placard was a large shallow box, filled with owl pellets. Some of the pellets I deliberately broke in half to show the protruding bones. Other pellets were left whole, and some were completely broken apart. After briefing a few of the Scouts on the pellets, we were in business. The public was amazed and fascinated, and the boys practically fought over the opportunity to "preside" over the owl pellets. They took turns arranging the yellowed incisors and jaw bones of the rats in nice neat rows. Skulls and other assorted bones made up another row. The exhibit was such a tremendous success that now I'm planning to make up a number of these exhibits for permanent display at various nature centers and museums.

These are just a few of the many things banders can do. With a little effort and planning, every home station can achieve results with a banding project as well as accomplish even greater things for the cause of conservation.

58 Steamboat Landing Road,
South Amboy, New Jersey



"We didn't do it, honest!"