

BIRD BANDING -- AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL TOOL

By John Trott

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Beside the obviously excellent research tool it is well-known to be, bird banding can be one of the most effective educational devices available today. The degree of participation of youngsters is only limited by age and the amount of time the bander is willing to give. All effective methods of teaching science are inherent in the activity: careful observation, drawing of valid conclusions, accuracy in keeping records, and ability to organize time, energy and data. Through banding the scientific method can be brought to youngsters with vividness and an acute sense of involvement.

Above and beyond the above, banding birds can bring about a love of wildlife and lead to a deep sense of identification with conservation problems. A level of enthusiasm can be generated which will make the child see himself in relation to this environment and the beginnings of understanding of human and natural ecology take place almost automatically.

As a part of a science curriculum in junior or senior high school, a full time banding program can take the natural interest in the out-of-doors most youngsters already have and turn it into a valuable learning experience. As a teacher of the seventh grade at an independent co-operative school in Alexandria, Virginia, I have had the freedom to experiment and the facilities to develop a banding program which has had very exciting results. The Burgundy Farm School in Alexandria was perfect for the experiment for it has 22 acres of varied habitat and a school philosophy which encompasses an appreciation for the importance of an ordered, natural world as an essential part of a youngster's existence.

Bird banding is treated as any other part of the curriculum and given as much importance and care in its instruction as English or mathematics. Most students like to gaze out the window (if the school has windows) and if they can see birds visiting a feeder they are already directed toward an end. I first emphasize identification of the local birds which leads into discussion and lecture on field marks, distribution, family relationships and the use of resource material to find information. Next students do exhaustive research on the life history of one of the birds they are seeing daily or one they are likely to see as winter residents move in. Through this they delve into many aspects of ornithology and become familiar with terminology and above all, the best possible books on the subjects. Many discover Bent's LIFE HISTORIES and the fascination and wealth of information available in those volumes.

Students are exposed to and encouraged to read other general books about birds -- Cruickshank's A 1001 QUESTIONS ANSWERED ABOUT BIRDS, Lois and Louis Darling's BIRD, Sarita Van Vleck's GROWING WINGS, and THE

BIRDS from the LIFE Nature Library Series. Peterson's A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS is not a required text book but most students acquire it by the end of the first three months of school. Besides the above there is a great deal of talk which stimulates questions and discussion, the free-flowing, relaxed exchange of ideas essential to any real learning. Distribution, taxonomy, behavior in all its aspects (food, nesting, song, etc.) are touched on along with evolution, ecology and conservation. Much geography can be taught through basic ornithology as can history and Peter Matthiessen's WILDLIFE IN AMERICA has been a great help in showing youngsters what has happened in the United States and the results of man's drastic changes of the land.

Banding itself is taught through a careful, step-by-step development of skills with constant emphasis on the responsibility required of the individual. A sheet of questions is issued to each student; these cover all aspects of banding from what birds take what band sizes through how to keep records to the memorization of A. O. U. numbers of the ten or twelve birds most commonly handled. Students prepare for actual banding at their own rate and take a test when they feel ready. The test includes short descriptions of birds and the student has to identify each correctly from the short phrases. It also includes sample record forms, questions relating to band size and A. O. U. numbers, the history of banding, essential information in reporting recovered birds and requires each youngster to know what government agency controls bird banding in the United States. Each question on the test must be answered perfectly before the student is qualified to actually band birds and keep records and the test may be taken as many times as the student wishes in order that all information is thoroughly understood to the point that the youngster can use it freely.

Traps are always placed where they can be seen from the classroom and students work in groups of three under the close supervision of the teacher. Records are checked at the end of each day and as each student passes the banding test he or she is placed on the banding team so that it rotates daily with one member staying on three days in a row. Mistakes in the records rarely occur and birds are never mishandled or misidentified.

Four types of records are kept for each bird trapped: (1) Band number, as required by the Bird Banding Office, (2) Records by species, (3) "Dailys" -- this includes species, A. O. U. No., sex, age, weather, temperature, trap and other information and (4) Retrap records. These four make errors practically an impossibility, and if mistakes are made, they can be easily corrected. Besides this, each student is given a number as the banding test is passed and with this he or she is identified in all records. The seventh grade at Burgundy bands close to a thousand birds each school year of 30 to 40 species.

The sense of personal responsibility required is somewhat mature but most adults underestimate youngsters anyway. It has often been my

experience that students with a record of academic achievement below potential often begin to show marked improvement as the exactness, degree of personal organization, total commitment and deep interest required in banding and record keeping spill over into other subject matter areas. The most often repeated remark I hear from parents is "Johnny hates to miss school now, he's afraid you'll trap an exciting bird."

There are problems, of course, but they are external ones. Since the school has farm animals they often visit our banding station and we have had goats, chickens and occasional dogs. Cats also present a problem as they wander in from the surrounding neighborhood attracted by the large number of feeding birds. The students are always on the alert and the cat never gets very close before he is attacked with rock yells and occasionally an air rifle. On one occasion when I was ill a pleasant substitute remarked quietly, "Oh, look at the pretty white cat!" She was shocked and a bit dismayed when all twenty youngsters as a body jumped from their seats and ran out the door.

Since I am the licensed bander, the traps are never placed at the feeder unless I am in attendance. They are put out only after I arrive at school and brought in before school closes. On occasion I have met students at school on cold, snowy mornings or stayed after closing time. I find I am pretty helpless in the face of such overwhelming interest and enthusiasm.

Netting is done in the spring after the same careful preparation as described for trapping. This begins with a captive starling or house sparrow which is taken by each student from a net strung up in the classroom. Only the most responsible and careful students are allowed to erect nets and I must say that twelve- and thirteen-year-olds remove birds from nets with more care and facility than most adults I have seen.

I have been at Burgundy long enough now to see many youngsters go into college with a degree in ornithology, ecology or wildlife management as their goal. I have also seen youngsters' lives enriched and their vision the world enlarged. Also rewarding are the comments I get from public and private high school biology instructors who say "Your students are almost too well prepared -- they know so much and have such a keen interest."

Banding birds, mostly through netting, has also become an important part of a summer wildlife camp for the 11- to 15-year-old age group. This camp is sponsored by the school and runs two-week sessions in which the entire program is devoted to studies and enjoyment of the natural world.

With the realization that an independent day school in a wooded tract is an almost ideal situation for banding birds and many banders do not have the opportunity and time to devote to youngsters that I do,

still feel many banders can do a great deal toward making life richer for youngsters through a knowledge of birds. Possibly more important, the time spent may set some youngster headed toward a career in the sciences through a development at an early age of the fundamental skills necessary for studying one kind of science with care.

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BANDING STATION YOUTH PROGRAM
By Boletta J. Morris

I agree with Ralph Bell's note about getting our young people interested in what we say -- "Bird Banding".

A few years ago I started a youth program at my home (1 2/3 acres.) My husband and I built an outdoor area of logs. Children from all the local schools come as groups, to spend from 9:30 until noon with me. I talk about each bird caught that morning. Each bird is banded and I stress to them what they should do if a banded bird is found.

After banding has been completed, they are taken on my nature paths where they can see bird nest, some active and some finished. They see the bird pools I designed myself and made of plastic with rock and small stones to create different water levels. Underground hoses are laid to get the water drip necessary to attract birds.

If weather is rainy I have a walk in basement where we can band and talk. Last year I spoke to 2,000 children.

The children leave to return to their class room wishing they could spend the day with me. Maybe they will go home with their first look at a Scarlet Tanager, Indigo Bunting or Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

Although a program like this takes many hours away from my regular banding, I feel it is so necessary to teach this to our young people. (If any bander would enjoy seeing my area (top of Musconetcong Mts.) they will be very welcome.)

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