

MORE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF NEGATIVE INFORMATION

By G. Hapgood Parks

Allow me, please, to exclaim an emphatic "amen" in agreement with the fundamental principle expressed by T. A. Beckett, III, in his "The Importance of Negative Information" on pp. 181 and 182 in the July-August, 1966, issue of EBBA News. Please permit me, also, to supplement Mr. Beckett's experience with one of my own in which biased information has been created as the result of the same arbitrary banding office rule that he discussed.

In June, 1966, Mrs. Parks and I returned to Astle, New Brunswick, for our second banding study of migrating Evening Grosbeaks along the Miramichi watershed of that province. Less than 8 full banding days (June 14 - 21) sufficed to exhaust completely our supply of 500 Canadian bands. During those same few days we became increasingly appalled by the shocking slaughter which occurred as speeding motor vehicles ploughed through flocks of these birds and left their crushed bodies strewn along many miles of the heavily traveled highway that passed close by our banding site.

During our 5th day 2 bands were brought back to us by persons who had found them on the legs of Evening Grosbeaks that had been killed by motor vehicles. We had used one of these bands on our first banding day; the other, on our 4th day.

On June 21, our banding completed, we dutifully filled out duplicate sets of schedules, listing our 500 banded. In the spirit of complete accuracy we noted in the "Remarks" spaces on the appropriate schedules the histories of the two recovered bands. Then the entire report was mailed to Canadian Wildlife Service headquarters in Ottawa. Experienced banders know that, after being checked, one set of these schedules is forwarded to our own Banding Laboratory at Laurel, Md. This set is accompanied by a summary of the bander's records.

We appreciate the courteous consideration which prompted that a copy of this "summary" be sent to us. It "summarized" our records: "498 Evening Grosbeaks banded; 2 bands destroyed." The following explanation was appended: "When a bird is found dead within three months of banding, the band should be reported as 'destroyed' so we have amended the schedules concerning (the two bands in question). No mention was made of the "same ten-minute block" that we have all heard so much about, but we can be tolerant enough to believe that it was assumed by our "summarizer."

Unquestionably the Canadian Office had acted in accordance with accepted procedure when its personnel deleted these two birds from our schedules, but this does not change the fundamental fact that, as a result of this deletion, the official files contain an untrue copy of the correct record which we had conscientiously submitted.

Admittedly, the number of records involved here is very small. Within hours after our schedules had been mailed, however, 3 more of our bands were returned to us and, on July 1, we learned that a 6th had been recovered, all from Evening Grosbeaks which had been killed by motor vehicles, and within a very few miles from where they had been banded. In total, then, we stand to be credited with having "destroyed" more than 1% of the 500 bands we had requisitioned and used; nor would the official files hold any record of the deaths of any of the 6 birds which had actually worn those bands.

As one result of our brief New Brunswick visit we collected proof of the deaths of 18 banded Evening Grosbeaks, all killed by motor vehicles on Highway #8 between Fredericton and Newcastle. Official banding procedure refuses to acknowledge 6 of these deaths, however, because the birds did not wear their bands for at least 91 days, nor did they succeed in reaching one or more geographic minutes beyond the "vicinity" of the banding site before a speeding truck or automobile crushed out their lives. For the same reason the official records fail to acknowledge that those same 6 birds were ever banded. It would appear that possible future research based on such official records is destined to be found lacking in accuracy.

The number of bands and the number of records involved here may seem inconsequential when compared with Mr. Beckett's situation. Nevertheless, the fundamental principle is just the same, namely: an arbitrary rule which has as its primary purpose the protection of overtaxed Banding Laboratory facilities from an excessive load of records that are considered to be unimportant has been shown to produce:

- (1) an erroneous official record of the number of birds banded;
- (2) a dishonest official record of the number of bird deaths from a known cause;
- (3) a hidden bias in calculations (from official records) of the relative importance of various causes of mortality.

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