
Bander's Forum

Many years ago, when Mr. Baysinger was still Chief of the Bird Banding Laboratory, he made it clear to me that the role of the Banding Laboratory was to provide a data processing facility for banders to store and process the information gathered in the field. I can only assume that this position has not changed as no statement has been issued by BBL to the contrary, over the ensuing years.

With the onset and increase in popularity of personal computers of various brand names, it became apparent that certain banders, such as myself, might have the opportunity to use their computer equipment to generate banding schedules.

Having made this wish clear to the prevailing staffers at BBL, applicants for this "service" received a mailing consisting of an outdated program using FORTRAN computer language, which was both outdated and passe. So some of us, spent hundreds of hours reprogramming something to make our facility compatible with the demands set by BBL. I wrote a very long program in MBASIC (v. 5.1 for CP/M in my case) emulating a random access data base, with provision for cross-checking data to help the BBL and make it unnecessary for them to make certain edits. For example, in my case, I would enter a species using the so-called 4-letter code, which would access a data file to come up with the AOU# and Common Name. Similarly, the Location coding would retrieve the Region and Lat-Long data. A cross-check was built into check validity of AGE-SEX data vs. that published in BBM Vol. II, part 6. A further cross-check was built in to alert me to possible errors on mismatched band series vs. AOU#'s. This program works well, except that all these subroutines and data files it accesses slow the program execution down considerably to a point that "doing it by hand" is definitely faster. I am in the process of rewriting the program (spending more time on it) to convert standard Data Base generated files to banding schedules with the checks done after the fact.

What chagrins me about this gigantic effort is the lack of encouragement by the BBL as well as the lack of expertise on their part to understand the problems I have tried to express through a great deal of correspondence. For example, the best way to build data files into a program (at least in a micro-computer with limited RAM) is to use DATA statements. BBL does not accept DATA statements and insists that all so-called "look-up" files be separate entities. When I have tried to discuss this and other aspects of the computerization, the bottom line by those I was dealing with was always "Well I don't know anything about computers."

Well, I DO KNOW ABOUT COMPUTERS. I have been using and programming computers since 1977 when their use became popular for individuals such as myself. Aside from what Terry mentioned in the first BANDER's FORUM column, I would like to add that it behoves the BBL to learn about micro-computers, and to acknowledge the fact that micro-computers are NOT capable of running unlimited access to RAM and disk storage the computers at BBL enjoy. I have literally stuck hundreds, nay, thousands of dollars of effort and hardware into this project but I have NEVER even received a thank you from BBL for trying to save them editing time when in fact they are constantly complaining about having insufficient staff to do the job they are paid to do. Then they wonder about my apathy to their cause...!

I am still eager to cooperate but to do so, I need to engage in a healthy dialogue with them on the subject. First, are they really interested in getting data in, in computerized format, and if so, let's set up a nationwide committee of programmers to hammer out a program that is compatible with many computer brands and yet meets the standards set by BBL.

I would be happy to chair such a committee, provided BBL is eager to cooperate with me. Have one of your programmers of your EDP section contact me, and we will then see how we can integrate the use of personal type computers to the best interest of BBL.

Some of us (like myself) use the CP/M (tm, Digital Research) operating system, and I use MBASIC. Many others, particularly those with IBM equipment, use PC-DOS, and then there are those with APPLE, TRS, etc., all using their proprietary operating systems. Almost all of us use some form of BASIC. Some of us use commercial data bases (Personal Pearl, DBASE II or DBASE III and the like), and we can either program a conversion to schedules, or we can program a utility that emulates a DB and does the whole thing. It isn't that difficult but we need BBL's cooperation and encouragement.

Using computers is the first step to data analysis. Let's make maximum use of a facility that is available to us, and as such help the BBL overcome some of its apparent problems.

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