

BIRD-BANDING
by C. Stuart Houston

John James Audubon was the first man in North America to band birds, when in 1803 he placed silver wire around the legs of a brood of phoebes. Two of these birds returned to the same place the following year.

Shortly after the turn of this century, ornithologists decided that some method of marking birds would produce valuable data which could be obtained in no other way. Accordingly, in 1909, the American Bird Banding Association was formed. In 1920, the U.S. Biological Survey (now the Fish & Wildlife Service), realizing the tremendous possibilities of banding, took over this work. Canadian banders use U.S. bands, but in addition to the forms they make out for the use of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, they must make out duplicate records for the National Parks Bureau of the Canadian government, and send in requests for permits, bands, etc. through Ottawa.

To band birds in Canada, one must obtain a permit from the National Parks Bureau, which is also signed by the Game Commissioner for his particular province. Recommendations from two recognized ornithologists are also necessary, and it is required that the person be at least eighteen years of age. Bands and forms are then issued free of charge, but all equipment must be made or purchased by the bander himself.

All bands bear a number, and the inscription: "Notify Fish & Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C." (Older bands referred to the Biological Survey). On smaller bands, the legend is abbreviated and the address "Washington, D.C." is placed on the inside of the band. The bands are made of aluminum, and come in ten sizes. If the correct size is properly placed on the bird's leg, there is no danger to the bird, and due to its extreme lightness, it doesn't cause the bird any concern.

Well over three million of these bands have been placed on North American birds since 1920. Some 1700 people now devote their spare time to this work without remuneration. Many interesting facts about the migration, longevity, and habits of many species have been brought to light through banding. One of the most recent and most notable of these, was the discovery of the wintering place, hitherto unknown to scientists, of the Chimney Swift, when bands from 13 of these birds were recovered from Peru last spring.

Bird-banding records are of scientific value, and accordingly a thorough knowledge of all the birds in one's district is necessary. No conscientious bander ever places a band on a bird's leg unless he is positive as to its identity. Records, accurately listing the band number, species of bird banded, date and place of banding, and the sex and age of the bird when known, must be kept.

At first, the majority of the birds were banded as juveniles still in the nest. Later, simple Drop Traps were developed. With this type, bait is placed under a screen box, with one end held up by a stick. When a bird enters beneath the trap, a watcher, some distance away, pulls a string which is attached to the stick.

Automatic traps, of many types, have proved their worth. The best and simplest are those employing funnels or a simple tripping arrangement. Once the bird passes through the funnel into the trap, it is usually unable to find its way out. In other traps, the bird trips the door shut when it steps on a perch or wire within the trap.

No story of bird-banding would be complete without some mention of the late Jack Miner. He was a pioneer in the true sense of the word, and did a great deal to popularize banding and conservation with the general public. Concentrating exclusively on ducks and geese, he made his own bands, with his name on one side and a verse of scripture on the other.

Every dead bird seen should be examined carefully. It may carry a band. Such a band may have been placed on the bird a few weeks before by one of our Saskatchewan banders, or it might have been put on ten years before in Louisiana. Flatten the band out and mail it to the Fish & Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. If the bird is living, carefully record the full band number, and release the bird with a band on it. In either case report when and where you found the bird, and any other information you may know about its cause of death, etc. A reply from Washington

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will be received, telling the finder when the bird was banded and by whom, as well as its species, age and sex. They also notify the bander that his bird has been found and by whom.

At the present time, permits are not being issued to new banders due to the shortage of labor and material for bands. However, if any of our members feel they would enjoy this interesting hobby, we would advise them to write now and tell the National Parks Bureau that they are interested, so they may start at the first opportunity. Anyone hearing of the finding of a banded bird should make sure that it is reported to Washington. It may prove to be an unusual or important record.

DUCK DISASTER

Four years ago a "rain" of ducks was reported from Foam Lake one foggy night early in November, when Buffleheads dropped out of the sky over an area of several miles. A similar occurrence took place this Fall a few miles north-east of Clair and an account of the happening was sent us by A. Sloan, who obtained the details from Don Knox, a farmer in the district.

It seems that the week beginning Nov. 12 was very foggy and the whole countryside was heavily covered with hoar-frost. On Nov. 15, Mr. Knox decided to burn a straw pile and started the fire about 7.30 in the evening. The next morning when driving along the highway he noticed a few dead ducks, but thought nothing of this as they could easily have collided with the telephone wires in the fog of the night before. However, a little way further on he noticed a family of Indians picking up something in his fields and he immediately investigated.

To his amazement, he found hundreds of dead and dying ducks scattered all over his field and that of a neighbor. Some had smashed bodies, others broken legs and wings, while some birds, although uninjured, seemed stunned and completely dazed. The Indians carried away a wagon box full of dead birds and came back for more. Other nearby residents rescued some of the living birds and took them home, releasing them in a few days. Mr. Sloan said he saw a sackful of the dead birds and they all appeared to be Lesser Scaups.

As for the cause of the disaster - The most plausible explanation seems to be that the ducks were confused with the fog to start with, and then the light from the bonfire illuminated the hoar-frost on the stubble, so that the ducks mistook it for water. They then tried to land at the same rate of speed with which they come in on water. The result on frozen ground was disastrous.

Queried as to how many ducks might have been involved, Mr. Knox estimates that there were between five and six thousand at the very least. A small percentage of the birds were uninjured; these were unable to take off out of the stubble but, when picked up and thrown into the air, made a successful get-away. Of course only a few were saved in this manner, and Mr. Knox fears that many fell prey to weasels and other predators as a few days later he found many bodies from which the heads had been eaten off.

In both disasters - at Clair this year and at Foam Lake in 1940 - fog seems to have been one of the major factors, although the Foam Lake occurrence presented several extremely puzzling points. If anyone has ever come across a similar duck tragedy it would be most interesting to hear the details.

The very heavy southward flight of ducks this year has already been noted in the newspapers. H.M. Rayner, Ituna, reported well over 10,000 Lesser Scaups on the lakes between Lebrét and Fort Qu'Appelle on Nov. 2. Stuart Houston noted large numbers of this species still present Nov. 12. -12-