

EARLY SASKATCHEWAN BIRD BANDERS IN PERSPECTIVE

C. STUART HOUSTON, (Banding permit 00460), 863 University Drive, Saskatoon Saskatchewan. S7N 0J8

On a recent visit to the central office for North American bird banding at the Patuxent Refuge, Laurel, Maryland, for a 3-day meeting on the future of North American bird banding, and a second visit to complete my historical studies, I couldn't help thinking back to the early history of banding, internationally, nationally and in our province.

Europe

The Romans anticipated later bird-marking practices. Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (61-113 A.D.) told of a knight from Volterra who took captured swallows to Rome and painted them with his winning colors, so that his friends back home would know of his victory.⁴

There are some anecdotal references to early, single marking experiments in Europe. On 18 May 1647 a Grey Heron was captured by a falcon belonging to King Wladislaw IV of Poland; it was recaptured by another falcon on 19 July 1677, the first longevity information from banding.⁴ In 1796, a Mr. Pleydell of Whatcombe House, Clenston Wood, Dorsetshire, England, caught a Woodcock alive in a rabbit net in February. He placed a ring of brass around its leg and then by chance shot the same bird in the very same coppice in December.²² In 1804, Brugmann marked White Storks in Holland, but had no results from this.⁴

The "father of bird ringing" in Europe was Hans Christian Cornelius Mortensen, who taught at the Cathedral School, Viborg, Denmark. He placed his first two aluminum bands on starlings in 1890, but didn't begin banding in earnest until 1899

when he banded 165 starlings. From these he had two recoveries. By 1908 he had banded 263 storks and began to receive a great many recoveries.^{16 18} In 1903, a ringing station had been established by the German Ornithological Society at Rossitten (Rybacij) on a sandspit along the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea within what is now Lithuania 50 km north of Konigsberg, under the direction of Dr. J. Thienemann.²¹

North America

In North America, the application of silver wires attached to a brood of Eastern Phoebe nestlings at Mill Grove Farm in eastern Pennsylvania by John James Audubon in 1803 has been widely quoted.¹ Audubon claimed that two of the phoebes returned the next summer. Either Audubon had beginner's luck — or he couldn't tell whether one or two phoebes had rings — or else he was a liar. Since nestlings are subject to a 50% mortality rate in their first year and since in most species nestlings disperse rather widely, it seems statistically improbable but possible, that two of four returned to their natal site. Next, John Beck sewed a piece of chamois around the tarsus of a Purple Martin in August 1812, and had it return the next year.²³

North American banding began in earnest when Dr. Paul Bartsch banded 101 nestling Black-crowned Night Herons with an inscription, "Return to Smithsonian."² In 1904, Leon Jacob Cole of New Haven and P.A. Taverner, then a Michigan architect, popularized their plan for a widespread network of banders. Taverner published in the Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club

1905,¹⁹ but Cole did not get in print until 4 years later.⁷ Taverner gave bands to friends around the United States willing to apply them. His bands had the inscription, "Notify the Auk, New York." Taverner's first recovery came from a tagged Yellow-shafted Flicker banded on 29 May 1905 by Charles Kirkpatrick in Keoka, Keokuk County, Iowa. It was shot at Many, Sabine Parish, Louisiana, on Christmas day that year.²⁰

On 8 December 1909 the American Bird Banding Association was formed in New York City with Howard H. Cleaves as its secretary. Two years later, the Linnaean Society of New York took over the sponsorship of bird banding, under the direction of Cleaves (who 40 years later was on the Audubon Society lecture circuit to places as far-flung as Saskatchewan).¹⁵ Bands were manufactured and distributed to a select group of ornithologists around the United States.

On 11 November 1919, at the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in New York City, S. Prentiss Baldwin of Cleveland presented a paper showing that information could be obtained through systematic trapping of adult birds. His paper stirred intense interest and from that point events moved incredibly fast.

Only 15 days later, on 26 November, Dr. Edward W. Nelson, Chief of the United States Biological Survey, wrote to the Linnaean Society, offering to take over the banding work. On 9 December, the Linnaean Society accepted the offer. On 1 March 1920, Frederick C. Lincoln reported to duty as chief of bird banding at the Biological Survey in Washington, D.C.¹⁵ Wouldn't it be great if governments today could respond as quickly to perceived conservation needs?

The Bird Banding Laboratory was in full operation by 1921, recruiting volunteers through continent-wide publicity. A small

office was established in Ottawa to process Canadian permits and issue bands, but the central record-keeping has always been at the United States' headquarters. Soon banding, haphazard and inconsistent though the activities were, was one of the leading contributions to ornithological knowledge made by unpaid volunteers. The number of banders increased from 135 in 1921 (2845 birds were banded) to 490 in 1922 (6000 birds banded) to 851 in 1923 (25,000 birds) and 971 in 1924 (40,432 birds).¹⁷ Saskatchewan, with five banders, was "coming on stream" and contributing its share of birds by 1923. By June 1931, nearly 1,400,000 birds had been banded in the United States and Canada.

Saskatchewan

I was fascinated to see how disproportionately Saskatchewan banders had monopolized the early band permit numbers. Saskatchewan people took an early interest in banding — but an artifact in the way the permit numbers were assigned retrospectively, after years of operation without such numbers, gives Saskatchewan a disproportionate monopoly on the low numbers, and makes our role appear more important than it really was.

For several years permit numbers below 999 were reserved for Canadians only, but this was by no means consistently applied, since there were three Americans, banding within the United States, in the first 40 permit numbers and 188 in the first 500. Nor were Canadian numbers issued in a strictly chronological fashion. Instead they seem to have been assigned in a capricious or idiosyncratic fashion as is evident from the list below.

Saskatchewan residents received 4 of the first 10, 6 of the first 20, 9 of the first 30 and 11 of the first 40 permit numbers, over 25% in place of the 2% that would be predicted on the basis of sharing with

48 states and 9 other provinces at the time. These banders, their address, and the year they began banding were as follows:

002 Fred Bradshaw, Game Commissioner, Regina (1921)

006 Edgar E. Baynton, Maple Creek and Belbutte (1928)

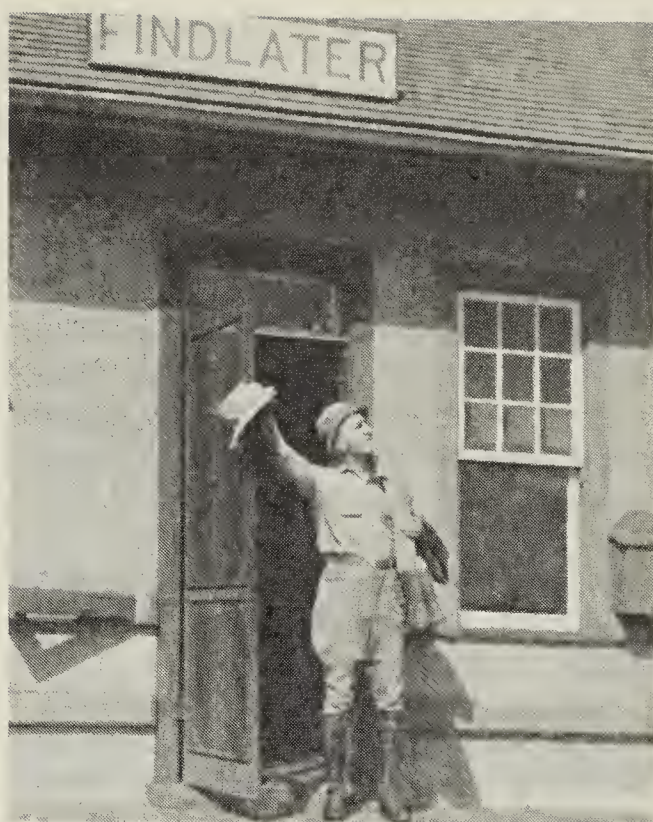


The first published recoveries of Saskatchewan banding appeared in the Annual Report of the Chief Game Guardian

- 007 Harry L. Felt, Findlater (1922)
- 008 James C. Silver, Unity (1922)
- 014 Reuben Lloyd, Davidson (1923)¹³
- 016 John R. Carter, Muscow (1929)¹²
- 021 J.A.M. Patrick, Yorkton (1926)¹¹
- 022 Philip Siemens, Hepburn (1929)
- 023 R.H. Carter, Muscow (1923)¹⁰
- 033 J.A. Briggs, Regina (1926)
- 034 John Dick, Jr., Elstow & Fairholme (1929)

For four of these banders, accounts have already been published.¹¹⁻¹⁴ Since I consider the history of banding to be one of the necessary foundation stones of a definitive *Birds of Saskatchewan*, scheduled to be published later in this decade, readers can look forward to a series of short papers telling of the activities of the early banders in our province.

The first publication of Saskatchewan banding results was in a place where few researchers would ever find it, in the Annual Report of the Chief Game Guardian. It mapped the direct recoveries in the first hunting season from 443 ducks,³ banded with private non-government-issue bands by A.W. Martin near Findlater and Kinisno.⁹ Beginning with the May 1924 issue of the *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, and continuing through the issue of March 1932, the Canadian National Parks Branch published 34 instalments of "The Official Canadian Record of Bird-banding Returns."⁵ This listed the initial recoveries of Saskatchewan banders together with those from all other provinces. Of special interest were the recoveries from birds banded by Jack Miner with his private bands (each of which had a short verse of scripture, but no number). Miner was prevailed upon to have these published in the issues of November and December 1927 and January 1928. Miner's recoveries included a Mallard shot at Humboldt and "ducks" shot at Englefeld and Dubuc, Saskatchewan. The first published note written by a Saskatchewan bander was



Harry Felt, bird bander

George Lang's account of how marauding crows and magpies destroyed his rookery of Black-crowned Night Herons south of Indian Head in June 1927.¹⁴

Band permit numbers are used on the individual "Certificate of Appreciation" awarded to each person who reports a bird band and on the computer printouts that summarize the results of banding. All "recoveries," including those from the beginning of banding, are on the big mainframe computer at the Patuxent Research Refuge of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Because of limited space on small bands, the mail address for reporting a band recovery is simply "Bird Band, Washington, D.C." On the smallest bands, such as those for wrens and chickadees, the address is on the inside of the band where few finders know to look for it. About 10,000 recoveries are reported each year from approximately one million birds banded in the United States and Canada each year, with a rate of 1% overall. However the rate is over 10% for waterfowl, 5% for colonial birds and raptors, and 0.1% or less for warblers. Such recoveries help to

tell us where birds go and how long they live.

Acknowledgements:

I wish to thank my wife, Mary I. Houston, for several days of painstaking work alongside me in searching through old files and microfilms in the Bird Banding Office at Laurel, Maryland. John Tautin and his dedicated staff of 37 people placed all their facilities at our disposal and went out of their way to help.

¹ AUDUBON, J.J. 1834. Ornithological biography. Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black. Volume 2, pp. 126-127.

² BARTSCH, P. 1904. Notes on the herons of the District of Columbia. *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Coll.* 45:104-111.

³ BRADSHAW, F. 1922. Report of the chief game guardian. Regina: Saskatchewan Dept. of Agriculture, 17th Annual Report, pp. 329-382.

⁴ BUB, H. and H. OELKE. 1989. The history of bird marking till the inception of scientific bird ringing. *The Ring* 12:141-163.

⁵ CANADIAN NATIONAL PARKS SERVICE. 1924-1926. Official Canadian record of bird-banding returns. *Can. Field-Nat.* 38:91-93, 133-135, 154-157, 177-179, 190-191; 39:18-19, 39-40, 54-55, 82-83, 119-122, 169-171, 191-193, 206-209; 40:62-64, 106-111, 158-164; 41:66, 94-98, 141-144, 191-195; 42:19-24, 107-110, 128-129, 151-161; 43:42-46, 67-68, 86-91, 138-143, 192-196; 44:72-76, 171-176; 45:44-48, 150-154; 46:70-74.

⁶ CLEAVES, H.H. 1913. What the American Bird Banding Association has accomplished during 1912. *Auk* 30:248-261.

⁷ COLE, L.J. 1909. The tagging of wild birds as a means of studying their movements. *Auk* 26:137-143.

⁸ COLE, L.J. 1922. The early history of bird banding in America. *Wilson Bull.* 34:108-115.

⁹ GOLLOP, J.B. 1961. A.W. Martin — early Saskatchewan bander. *Blue Jay* 19:118.

¹⁰ HOUSTON, C.S. 1945. Saskatchewan bird banders: R.H. Carter, Jr., of Muscow. *Blue Jay* 3:37.

¹¹ HOUSTON, C.S. 1967. Saskatchewan bird banders: Judge J.A.M. Patrick. *Blue Jay* 25:172-174.

¹² HOUSTON, C.S. 1968. Saskatchewan bird banders: John R. Carter of Muscow. *Blue Jay* 26:118.

¹³ HOUSTON, C.S. 1969. Saskatchewan bird banders: Reuben and A.C. Lloyd of Davidson. *Blue Jay* 24:27.

¹⁴ LANG, G. 1927. Marauding crows and magpies. *Wilson Bull.* 39:243.

¹⁵ LINCOLN, F.C. 1921. The history and purposes of bird banding. *Auk* 38:217-228.

¹⁶ LINCOLN, F.C. 1922. Hans Christian Cornelius Mortensen. *Auk* 39:592.

¹⁷ LINCOLN, F.C. 1928. A bibliography of bird banding in America. *Auk* 45:suppl., 1-73.

¹⁸ MORTENSON, H.C.C. 1950. Studies in bird migration, being the collected papers of H. Chr. C. Mortensen, 1856-1921. Copenhagen: Munksgaard. 272 pp.

¹⁹ TAVERNER, P.A. 1904. The tagging of birds. *Bull. Michigan Ornithological Club* 5:50-51.

²⁰ TAVERNER, P.A. 1906. A tagged flicker. *Wilson Bull.* 18:21-22.

²¹ THIENEMANN, J. 1905. Bericht über den vogelzugversuch. *Journal für Ornithologie* 392-399.

²² TUFTS, R.W. 1927. Bird banding in 1798. *Can. Field-Nat.* 41:17-18.

²³ WOOD, J.B. 1953. John Beck the second American bird-bander. *Bird Banding* 24:67.