

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge

Bird Banding for Conservation

Commonly asked questions and answers:

What is bird banding and how are birds banded? Bird banding is a tool that enables biologists to obtain information about birds, much of which they couldn't acquire in any other way. Birds are captured in fine, nearly invisible nets called mist nets. They are fitted with a special, lightweight aluminum leg band that is inscribed with a unique, nine-digit number. They are identified to species, age, and sex, and measurements are taken. The birds are handled for about 15 minutes, and released unharmed.



Isn't it stressful for the birds? No, in fact, while in the nets most birds are very calm when they are left alone. That's why it is so important that the birds are not approached except by experienced, trained staff who can immediately and safely remove the birds from the nets. We monitor the nets at least once every hour. After removal, birds are then placed in individual cloth bags, which keep them safe and calm.

Occasionally, predators may find the bird, or accidents may occur. The injury rate for bird banding across North America is less than

1% of all birds banded. This would roughly equal 11,000 birds annually. Compare this to some other human-related casualty rates:

- Outdoor pet cats: Tens (perhaps hundreds) of millions of birds per year (39 million in Wisconsin alone, according to a recent study)
- Glass windows: Tens of millions per year
- Television towers: Nearly 5 million per year

And none of these human-related sources of death contributes to a further understanding of birds in the way that bird banding does.

What can we learn from bird banding? Bird banding is necessary to gather data about:

Population dynamics

- Survival rates and longevity
- Annual productivity
- Establishing population trends
- Delineating separate populations

Bird movements

- Migration routes
- Tracking range expansion and new colonizations
- Dispersal between and within populations

Ecology of birds

- Territory size
- Habitat requirements
- Social structure
- Annual cycles (nesting, molting, migration)



- Importance of migratory stopover areas via individual stopover times and weight gains

Why are you banding birds here?

Mist-netting and bird banding allows us to monitor long-term changes in bird populations and relate them to factors such as weather, restoration, and habitat change. Banding allows us to determine how long birds live (survivorship) and how successful the population is at producing young. By understanding these factors we can better conserve bird populations.

Who can band birds?

The banding of birds in the United States requires a federal banding permit, issued by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Banders are a select group. There are currently only 4000 permit holders in the United States. Applicants who are at least 18 years of age and are able to identify all of the common birds in their different seasonal plumage may apply for a bird banding permit. Persons who want to apply for a banding permit must be able to show that they are qualified to

safely trap, handle, and band birds. Only those persons who are well qualified and have a well-defined research project are issued banding permits. You can visit the federal Bird Banding Lab web site at: www.pwre.gov/bbl

Do the bands hurt the birds? No, the band fits around their leg, loose like a bracelet, not as tight as a watch.

Does the band impede their flying? No, studies on captive birds have shown no effect. The bands for small birds are made of aluminum (the same material soda cans are made from), and they are very light.

Do birds ever die or get hurt in the net? Very rarely. We are careful to always put the birds' safety first. By watching how the birds are behaving we can tell if the bird is under stress and we would let a stressed bird go or put it in our hot box to warm up before letting it go.

The birds you are holding seem so calm, why is that? The way I am holding it keeps it from struggling. Its wings are pressed against the back of my hands and my fingers are actually on its shoulders.

Do you ever catch the same bird twice, or twice in one day? Yes, about 1/3 of the birds we catch are re-captured. It is really our hope to re-capture birds. That way we can learn things such as how long birds live (survivorship) and how birds change as they age. When we re-capture migratory birds from season to season we are able to tell that that individual survived the winter and migration. We do also catch the same bird in one day usually this occurs in the breeding season when birds are very distracted and are busy defending territories and feeding young. Some individuals may learn where the nets are located, but the fact that we catch them repeatedly even in a day suggests that learning to avoid the nets is not a major factor in the population declines we notice.

If you catch a bird again, do you just let it go or do you still band it? If we catch a bird with a band already, we still process it, or take all the data, because this can teach us about how the bird has changed since we last captured it. If we catch the same bird twice in one day then we weigh it again and release it.

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