

Legacy of a tiny leg-banded bird found on the Refuge

by Ted Bailey

Thirty-three years ago on June 4, 1982 a husband and wife—the Peralas—decided to take a walk one evening along one of the roads within the Swanson River Oilfield on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Peralas were living there for the season as facility watchdogs. Along the way they found a small unidentified bird lying dead in the road apparently struck by a passing vehicle. Then they noticed a small aluminum band on its leg with the number 1300-51982. They called our office and I told them to bring in the bird.

I subsequently identified the bird as an orange-crowned warbler and sent the information to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Bird Banding Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland. Later I received a report on the bird that was, and still remains, fascinating to me even today.

Amazingly, the then young-of-the-year bird was banded 2,182 miles away on September 28, 1976 in San Luis Obispo, California by Fern R. Tainter of the Western Bird Banding Association. Assuming that the bird was hatched in Alaska, probably on the Refuge, this tiny bird weighing less than one ounce, would have flown back and forth between Alaska and at least as far south as California twelve times or roughly a distance of at least 26,000 miles.

What was also amazing was that it was the first banded orange-crowned warbler encountered in Alaska based on records from 1960 through 2014 and, at the time, was the then longest living orange-crowned warbler known at the age of six years. It held that longevity record for orange-crowned warblers for 20 years, until 2002, when another was aged at 8 years and 3 months in California. The current longevity record for an orange-crowned warbler is 8 years and 7 months and is also based on one banded in California in 1995 and encountered there again in 2004.

Orange-crowned warblers are small, rather drab grayish to olive-green birds. Breeding males have a

yellowish breast and their orange crown is very difficult to see. They are generalist feeders eating flies, spiders, beetles, caterpillars and ants but can supplement their diet with fruits, seeds and berries.

Here on the Kenai they are often heard rather than seen because they inhabit thick cover dominated by alders, willows and young aspen. Like many songbirds they migrate at night to avoid predators by using magnetic fields, polarized light, positions of the stars, and the position of the setting sun as directional clues. They breed throughout forested regions of northern North America including Alaska. Some overwinter in central California and the southern United States while others continue migrating south to Guatemala and Belize.

Comparatively little is known about the ecology, behavior and migration of this drab warbler relative to other warblers. For example, the banding of 165,840 orange-crowned warblers in North America from 1960 through 2014 have resulted in only 146 encounters (resightings or band recoveries), and of 26,304 banded in Alaska during the same period only 7 have been encountered. Fortunately, despite a decline across North America of 33 percent since 1968, orange-crowned warblers are still fairly abundant and can be seen by astute observers on the Kenai Peninsula from May through September.

Whenever I see one I sometimes think of orange-crowned warbler number 1300-51982. I wish all orange-crowned warblers well on their future journeys.

Ted Bailey is a retired Kenai National Wildlife Refuge wildlife biologist who has lived on the Kenai Peninsula for over 39 years. He maintains a keen interest in the Peninsula's wildlife and natural history. You can find more information about the Refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.