

## Banding

*To band a bird is to hold a ticket in a great lottery.*  
Aldo Leopold  
“65290” *A Sand County Almanac*

### Before

We don't recall how we found out about the opportunity. I asked Dot recently if she remembered. “Maybe there was an announcement on one of the Virginia birding lists. I'm not sure anymore,” was her response.

I remember I wasn't enthusiastic. I tried to identify potential conflicts as a plea to say no. Referring to our planned birding trips to North and South Carolina and another to Cape May, I asked, “Won't it interfere with our birding activities?”

“It's an opportunity for us to study birds up close. I think it will make us better birders. Anyway, we're volunteers. We go when we want. It's not going to interfere with anything.”

I like her use of us. In the Army, this is called *command performance*. The boss says it's not mandatory, but it is. There is no counter argument. I know she's not going to drive 20 miles, one way, in the dark to the Occoquan Bay Refuge by herself. She hates to drive at night. I'm going to have the privilege to take her. It will be us. “OK, we'll try it. We'll see how it goes.”

### April Fools, 2006

My birding notes for the day are simple:  
*First day as volunteers for bird banding and were taught basics for identifying age, sex, fat, and skull development. Species caught and banded while we were assisting included Eastern towhee, tufted titmouse, song sparrow, Northern cardinal, white-throated sparrow, and brown creeper. Creeper was only second one caught and tagged in six years. One white-throated was just tagged the day before. Bill got to release a song sparrow.*

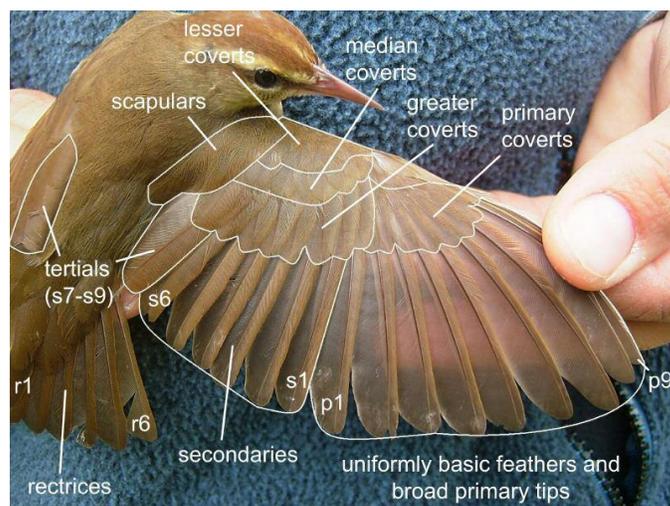
A lot's missing. No mention we got up an hour and a half before we normally do to go to work. We're volunteering to get up earlier on our weekends. When we reach the rally point of the refuge gate, it's still o-dark-thirty with just a hint dawn is coming.

First, we have to sign official volunteer agreements with the Fish & Wildlife Service. Our assigned refuge guardian is Marty McClevey. While he's not there in person, his spirit insists we fill out the agreement just in

case there is an injury. “Oh my god, bird banding is hazardous. A bird could peck my eye out. They're worried about bird flu.” I wish I had thought of this earlier to discourage Dot.

Suzanne Miller is our lead bander. She's a retired civil servant for the Navy, but was contracted back. She's our age and has been doing this for decades. She hands us a dead female Purple Finch. Cause of death: crashing into one of the windows of her home. Our leader doesn't know we've seen maybe five Purple Finches total in our lifetime. Mum's the word. The bird is frozen.

Suzanne points out and expects us to memorize immediately what P9, primaries, secondaries, tertials, primary coverts, rectrices, supercillium, *ad nauseum* are. Feathers are broad and truncate versus narrow and tapered. Are they fresh or worn? I have to look for molt limits. There are prejuvenal, preformative, and prebasic molts. We have to check the development of the skull.



Peter Pyle photo from “Birding by Feather: A Molt Primer (2008)”

I'm suppressing the urge to cry out, “Hey, lady, I'm way pass critical mass on what I can learn in one sitting.” But Suzanne encourages me to recite the detailed life history of this dead avian creature using the 3,000 terms she regurgitated to me 30 seconds ago. “Hello, lady, it came from an egg and now it's dead. The feathers are brown. What more is there?” I don't think I'm passing. Is there a grade for the first day?

But there's more to knowing its secret life. I now have to blow on its throat, under-wing, breast, and belly. You have to move the feathers back with your breath to check for fat and breeding readiness – either the existence of a brood patch and/or the showing of a cloacal protuberance. I can't even say *cloacal*. Why can't banders say what they mean, “Is the boy exhibiting he's sexually excited?” It's a dead female finch anyway, some practice for checking cloacal. No way is this bird excited.

I find blowing to see these things, especially fat around the throat, aren't easy when your own fingers are twice the size of the bird you're holding. You can hyperventilate or pass out from all that blowing if you're not careful.

*El Segundo*, Bill Teetz, hands me a soda straw he's clipped down to 3 inches. "Try this until you get the hang of it." Teetz is ex-Navy and ex-FBI, and usually no nonsense and to the point. He smiles at my red face. I must be ready to pass out.

To know the finch's age, I have to study those broad and truncate, narrow and tapered, and fresh or worn feathers. I have to check for molt limits. Incredibly, people have written books solely about molt limits. Plus, I have to measure the wing and tail, and weigh the frozen bird. I have to skull it – wet the top of the head to see through the skin and determine if there are any observable gaps in the skull cap. Hello, lady, I'm not Superman, I don't have x-ray vision."

Also helping are Paul Napier and Bev Smith. Paul is president of the Cape May Raptor Banding Project, and works for Northrop Grumman. Paul has a permit to band raptors but not passerines. He sees passerines as, "Just food for real birds." Paul collects bones and junk washed up on the beach between the net runs. He has a dead bird list. I'm wondering if he's going to add the finch.

Bev Smith is a personnel officer for a private firm. She's seeking a naturalist license and her own banding permit. Bev is meticulous, exacting. We have the Pyle reference book and the "speedy" Pyle illustrated guide. Everyone uses the speedy but Bev. She prefers to review every nuance Pyle discusses in his tome before making her age determination. I admire her careful, exacting study.

Dot and my "assisting" boils down to writing down in banding code what the banders are seeing on the bird they are processing. Birds are given a four letter code. The code usually is the two-digits of the species common first name and two-digits of the last. So a Brown Creeper is BRCC, a Common Yellowthroat is COYE, and a Mourning Dove is MODO. Easy. But a Tufted Titmouse is ETTI for Eastern Tufted Titmouse. Now, no one has called this species anything but a Tufted Titmouse for years, but once coded, the code remains or all previous data would have to be fixed in **Bandit**. Bandit is the US Geological Service's data program for bird banding. All data is sent to the USGS in Patuxent, Maryland. The prime directive is "don't violate Bandit."

Then there's the curious case of the Black-throated Green Warbler. Its code is BTNW. Shouldn't it be BTGW? There is no BTGW in the USGS complete species table. I figure both the scientific community and the government put a lot of thought into that one.

I released a Song Sparrow. This means someone else processed the bird and handed it to me in the correct manner so I could carefully grab the bird with one hand; place it on the palm of my other, and let it go. I don't recall the bird actually touching my palm before jetting off. It disposed of excess weight before it left. Birds, like airline companies, do this to ensure the most economical and safe flight. But you usually don't have to wash your hands after the airline company dumps your luggage. I am given container full of sanitized hand cleaning wipes to remove the milky white excess weight.

We go on a net run. Net runs are usually every half hour, but the wait times are shorter if the weather is windy, cold, or wet. We don't want to lose a bird in the net. The smallest are the least hardy: hummingbirds, kinglets, Winter Wrens, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. We aren't licensed to band hummingbirds. They require special training and bands. We need to release them after we check to see if they were banded elsewhere. We don't band game birds. The biggest bird the station has banded is a Pileated Woodpecker.

The hardest part of banding is extracting the bird out of the mist net. You have to imagine how they flew in, and work them back out in a similar reverse manner. Well, that's the theory. Larger birds are usually easy to extract unless they've been putting up a fuss. They can get double bagged or pull the net tight with their feet. Blue Jays do that a lot. But the worst of the bigger birds are the woodpeckers. They have a nasty habit of getting their barred and sticky tongues caught in the net. It usually takes a couple of folks, and sometimes a scissors to cut the tongue free. Some birds are quiet, and just hang there. Thrushes and warblers do that. Others, like Tufted Titmouse and Pileated Woodpeckers, scream bloody murder. Size doesn't matter as both are loud screamers.

The warblers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Winter Wrens, and some of the sparrows are the most difficult to extract. The net cords wrap around their wings tightly. You can break a sparrow's leg if you tug too hard. Since it is our first day, we only watch the veterans extract the birds.

It's just past noon, and the six hours of open net time is over. We have to learn to twirl the nets closed and tie

them shut with cords using slip knots so they can be opened easily in the morning.



We've survived our initiation day. We are scheduled to return in the morning. No rest this weekend. Dottie's so excited she's asking Suzanne for homework and a reading assignments. She's seeking a higher understanding.

Personally, I'm recounting pluses and minus of banding boot camp. But after seeing Dot's expression when Bill Teetz was posing the Brown Creeper, I know I'm not going to talk her out of bird banding any time soon.

## Day Two

Birding notes for April 2, 2006:

*Dottie's first banding was a yellow-rumped warbler. Her first release was a Northern cardinal, and first out of the net, a palm warbler. Bill's first banding was a Northern cardinal, and first out-of-the-net a white-throated sparrow. Thirty-five new birds banded including: Carolina wren, Northern cardinals, field sparrow, song sparrow, white-throated sparrow, ruby-crowned kinglet, yellow-rumped warbler, palm warbler, Eastern tufted titmouse, American robin, Northern flicker, and red-bellied woodpecker (2). Six recaptures: Carolina wren, Carolina chickadee (2), Northern cardinal females (2), and female Eastern towhee. A white-breasted nuthatch was caught but escaped before banding.*

The notes are probably as wrong as they are brief. I think so much was happening I couldn't recount what



order things actually took place.

Janet Martin is here instead of Bev. Bill Teetz and Paul Napier are both back. Janet does computer work for some company that contracts with the government. One word

for Janet is enthusiasm. She gets excited over every bird she processes. Her favorite words are MODO and COYE. On another day, she will demonstrate the uncanny ability of willing into the nets the species of bird she wants to band. Well, it worked for two net runs in a row. That's our crew of six for today.

The only regular we haven't met yet is Joanna Taylor. Joanna's husband retired from the State Department. She's been all over the world observing birds. She's the lead for the two Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) stations at Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge in the summer. She's the bird ID guru. You can't band a bird if you can't determine what species it is.



Suzanne thinks we have progressed enough to be allowed to attempt extracting birds from the net, and to process one. I have pictures of Dot taking a female cardinal out of a bag and processing it. They were taken before she did the Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warbler. This may have been her first

bird, or maybe someone else put the band on and she did the rest of the processing. I'll never be sure as these kinds of details are unimportant to Dot.



If it be the cardinal, the first thing you learn about God's great design for the bird's orange beak wasn't just to crack seed shells but

to pinch the holy crap out of the careless bander. Cardinals have an instinct to immediately go for the soft, fleshy parts of the hand like the webs between your fingers. The novice learns from the pros to distract the bird with anything. Usually, the clothespin used to identify what net the bird was captured in. These pins are clipped to the transporting bag. When you extract a bird from the net, you put them in a bag. It calms them down, sort of like putting a cover on a canary cage to get the birds to sleep.

I'm next. I get a male cardinal. Suzanne must know cardinals are nearly indestructible. Dot captures the moment I'm checking the cloacal protuberance while



Suzanne is confirming my analysis. My boy is not excited.



The picture sequence then shows Dot banding the Yellow-rumped Warbler. So if the notes are right, this is her first.

Because of all our previous plans, we can volunteer for only five more days in 2006, but we're already promising to do more next year.

I find I'm addicted to "a bird in the hand."

### Last Day – May 23, 2010

*The tyro gets his thrill from banding new birds; he's a kind of game against himself, striving to break his previous score for total numbers. But to the old timer*

*the banding of new birds becomes merely pleasantly routine; the real thrill lies in the recapture of some bird banded long ago, some bird whose age, adventures, and previous condition of appetite are perhaps better known to you than to the bird himself.*

Aldo Leopold

"65290" *A Sand County Almanac*

It's a contest most days to see if Bill Teetz or we will be first at the refuge gate or Dunkin Doughnuts. It's a pretty tight race some days. We're now veterans of hundreds of extractions and processing. We've banded dozens of birds ourselves. We talk in banding code. We can understand what Suzanne is looking for in molt limits. We can age birds. We've washed our hands a lot.

We're using 40 hours of our annual leave, so we can show up on some week days during the season. We've volunteered 18 days this spring. I've even helped out a few days in 2009 at the MAPS station. We've skipped going to Magee Marsh for the spring warblers. We rather spend time at the station in hopes of being there when a Worm-eating Warbler is caught. Another year is gone, and we've missed seeing one again. But with retirement and Texas calling, it might be the last day here. In reality in some ways we are still novices.

We've been at the station when not a single bird was captured, and when just five birds were recaptured. We've been rained out, snowed out, and closed due to high winds. We're veteran enough to know that the recaptures are the most important.

We have reversed roles. I'm the one talking about taking the required training to be a licensed bander. I want to dissect the BANDIT data and work up some charts and graphs. Dot worries her health will limit her to assisting only by recording; no trips to the net or processing. I want to "ring and fling" as the British banders call it. Teetz taught me that phrase.

I see birds differently. Little bitty brown birds are now Song, Lincoln, Swamp, and White-throated Sparrows or Carolina and Winter Wrens. Dottie says banding a Winter Wren is "like banding a cotton ball." I've learned that a silent *Empidonax* Flycatcher in the hand can key out to being a Traill's which is bander talk saying it could be an Alder or Willow but we don't know for sure. Some expert birders claim they can tell the subtle differences in the plumage between the Alder and Willow in the bush. They definitely have skills beyond mere mortal eyes, or over confident egos. But unless the bird speaks, who can prove them wrong?

And my notes are different, focusing on recaptures and the uniqueness of plain and common birds like the iridescence of the female Common Grackle.

4/5/2010 – *It was a very slow day at the Occoquan Bay banding station yesterday; however, we recaptured this*



*Common Grackle female, band no. 1433-10979. She was originally captured in Net 6 on 5-8-2004. Yesterday she was recaptured in Net 5 which is*

*about 8 feet from Net 6. She is 8 years old, and is starting to develop this season's brood patch. While Common Grackles look black in the distance, in this picture you can see their glossy purplish-blue head. A male would have more of the gloss down into the breast area instead of the dull brown/black she exhibits. Common Grackles are known to live up to 21 years in the wild so she is just getting into middle age, and appeared to be in good health and shape when I processed her.*

4/26/2010 – *Migration has been slow in coming, and we haven't banded a lot of birds yet this year, but on Saturday we had an interesting event. We recaptured Northern Cardinal female 8001-20723. She was banded*



*on the same date [April 24] in 2001, making her 11.3 years old, which breaks the old station record for cardinal's age of 6.5 years (I think that's what Teetz told me). Anyway, she had a nice*

*brood patch, and is still going strong. The oldest known wild cardinal from the banding lab at Patuxent is 15.8 years old, so she has a way to go to beat the international record. She was caught about 30 yards from where she was first caught 9 years ago. I checked our recapture data, and she has not been recaptured during the last 9 years.*

We've had a lot of wondrous experiences over the past five spring banding seasons. Between runs, I'm reminiscing some of the glory days. Two of my personal favorite days were captured in photos.

On May 20, 2009, a Department of Agriculture film crew came with the Forest Service, Fish & Wildlife Service, and Audubon Society to film our bird banding operation for a segment in a documentary on invasive species and their effects to native species. While Dot and Suzanne were off with the film crew, I found a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird caught in our nets. The extraction was easy, but he wasn't moving. I didn't want our visitors to know, in case I lost him.

My notes say:

*When I extracted him, he wouldn't fly off, so I immediately took recovery action by putting him in a cloth bag and down my shirt. Joanna, one of the master banders, told me not to worry as he would recover.*

*After 20 minutes I checked on him, as he wasn't moving, and I was getting pretty concerned. As I opened the bag, I could see he was still alive, but his bill was stuck.*

*I got his bill out and then waited to*

*see if he was ready to go. He wasn't, so back down the shirt he went. Some 20 minutes later, I could feel him moving. Since I wanted to get a picture, I gave him to Joanna to release. When he was removed from the bag, he sat in her hand basking in the sun a couple of minutes before flying off, heading north in a buzz.*



The second date is May 14, 2008. My notes recount:

*I must admit it was one of the most fun days of bird banding I've ever had.*

*During our first run, we captured a pair of Yellow Warblers [next to each other in the net].*

*After we finished processing them, I asked to take a picture. As the male was moved close to the female, he started displaying. It was like he was saying, "Hey, you made it, too. Great to see yah." And when he got beside her,*





he made a peck. I captured the cute moment. Later I got to band a Prothonotary Warbler and a Yellow-breasted Chat. Dottie banded a Veery, White-throated

Sparrow, Yellow Warbler, "myrtle" warbler, and Field Sparrow. The station banded 17 different species, including a Chestnut-sided Warbler.



Missing in the notes is the fact Teetz's Chestnut-sided Warbler, like my hummingbird, wouldn't leave the warmth of his hand for a long while, allowing me to capture the moment.

While there have been other volunteers that have stayed a season or two, the core group remains Suzanne, Bill Teetz, Joanna, Paul, Bev, Janet, Dot and I. But there is a sideline player who brings doughnuts and entertainment when he drops by to check on us, Suzanne's husband Tony Quezon.

Now Tony is a raptor bander, who has known Paul since before recorded time. Tony helps out at the station once-in-awhile, but now his primary contribution to the birding community is his photography. Raptors in flight are supposedly his specialty, but it's much broader. He



claims, "I'm just a monkey pushing a button on a black box." But if true, he's a pretty talented monkey, or at least a lucky one. One who's patient enough to wait for the right moment. To me, his picture of a breeding Great Egret demonstrates more than

button pushing, but a real eye for the subject.

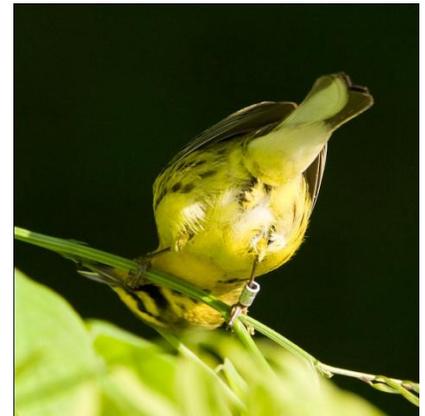
Tony always takes the time to help me improve my own photography and birding skills. He was kind enough once to call up a Sora that almost ran up my leg. A thrill yes, but no picture. He also convinced me to



upgrade from a point-and-shoot camera to a digital SLR. I have not regretted the switch, even after I dropped the camera two months after purchase, and had to pay the cost equivalent of two point-and-shoots to repair the lens and box. Tony is good about reminding me not to drop my camera.

Tony has a signature shot that he likes to send me. I know he's had a good day if I get one.

If I send a similar one back, he claims copy right infringement. In May 2009, he sent me this signature Prairie Warbler taken next to the banding station. It really got us excited because we'd been hearing



this bird all day, and couldn't catch it. We could read half the band numbers from the photo and they aligned with the two we banded in 2008. Without all the numbers we can't prove it, but I'm sure this was one of our birds. We have not recaptured it yet.

So here we are, the last operating day for the station for 2010. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "We few, we happy few, we band of banders." Joanna and Suzanne are sorting supplies to start MAPS banding in a few days. A lot of changes have happened on the refuge due to the record February record snows, our Carolina Wren count is incredibly low. And where are the Myrtle Warblers? We are still capturing new species. The station is now at 92 species and over 5,000 birds banded, including a first ever Barn Swallow and American Woodcock this season.

A few things remain the same. Paul invites everyone to join him when he's fall raptor banding at Cape May. This adventure is high on Dot and my bucket list, but we always manage to miss the opportunity due to



scheduling conflicts. This year's excuse it's the week we're moving to Texas.

Other things that stay the same include Paul still can't get a passerine into the correct

photographers grip, and Tony is out there seeking another cooperative bird to digitally capture.

And I still want to put bands on birds in hopes of future recaptures. I'm a true believer – I'm hooked on the avian lottery. I've found banding is a way to remove the overburden off one's soul, to free one's spirit with the bird, to reattach to the web of life.



Bev, Bill T, Paul, Suzanne & Dot 4/13/2008

Sincere thanks to our crazed fanatics and mentors: Suzanne, Bill T, Joanna, Paul, Bev, Janet, Tony, and our government appointed warden Marty for five years of great memories at the nets, hours of bird discussions during the waits, love of the refuge, and more.



PROW\_2510-30995, 5/13/2009

November 3, 2010