

## MEMORIES OF BIRD BANDING'S INFANCY IN AMERICA

By Beecher S. Bowdish

Systematic bird banding, as far as this country is concerned, was born at Cambridge, Mass., when, at the December 1909 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, Dr. Leon J. Cole gathered together in a quiet corner an interested group of members and breathed life into the hatching bird banding embryo. With the accomplishment of this initial act, whether Dr. Cole contributed further to the up-bringing of the bird banding chick my alleged memory saith not. However this infant chick was promptly taken under the highly competent wing of Howard H. Cleaves and to him, more by far than to any other one person, we owe the fact that the concept of bird banding survived its inevitably tough initial period and that thus we have bird banding as we know it today, rather satisfactory and satisfying.

For some time prior to this development of bird banding, I had been using a Dodson sparrow trap to help eliminate the over-population of English sparrows. Quite naturally this trap caught many song sparrows and other of our common bird neighbors. Such catches were simply turned loose forthwith. With the introduction of bird banding it was automatic to realize that here was a truly ideal, natural and increasingly abundant source of birds for banding, yet as late as 1923 I had only added one more trap, a hand operated, two foot square trap, with a full front drop door, a cord from which passed over pulleys to a counter weight in a back porch. Despite this very limited equipment, in that year it was not unusual to bring in before breakfast a dozen purple finches from each of the two traps, for a total of 539 of these birds for 1923. No doubt the experience of other pioneer banders was akin to mine in switching the primal use of traps from elimination of English sparrows to the obtaining of native species for banding.

Personal records for the years 1910, 1911 and 1912 are not available nor is any memory of my banding for that period. I have a rather hazy idea of trapping and banding some birds in those years; certainly it would seem that I must have done so. Unfortunately I had been sending in my banding records to that indefatigable worker, Howard Cleaves, Secretary of the Association, for some time before Cleaves, learning that I was not keeping a personal record, urged me to do so and sent me copies of some of the records I had filed. However, my first banding of which I now have definite record is for a Redwing nestling banded at Cobb's Island, Virginia, July 3, 1913, number 201 in the American Bird Banding Association's records. How the banding records have grown! Whether Cleaves still has the early records of banding and whether if so they contain any of mine for the first three years of the Association's existence I do not know.

The fact that total banding for the first three and a half years of this work had only reached a total of 201 birds is a striking revelation of how slowly interest and results developed in those years. Credit, however, belongs to those early banders that, despite the small results they had to show, they persevered until government biologists realized the possibilities and promise inherent in bird banding, took over and further systematized the work, and we have today our present bird banding organization, direct outgrowth of its 1909 infancy.

The early years of the bird banding movement, as exemplified in the American Bird Banding Association, had their ups and downs. It is my memory that the activity and vitality of the young organization sagged somewhat. How its real life source, Howard Cleaves, dug up the funds to provide bands and other expenses I don't know. At any rate he managed to keep the work going, with some help, until in 1920 its direction was taken over by the Biological Survey of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, later rechristened by Franklin D. Roosevelt the Fish and Wildlife Service and by him re-assigned to the Department of the Interior. Having served its very much worthwhile purpose, the American Bird Banding Association quietly passed out of the picture.

I do not remember the definite date on which the Eastern Bird Banding Association was born, neither do I know whether the annals of that organization at present in its possession contain this initial information. The late Maunsell S. Crosby writes (Natural History, Vol. XXIV, No. 5, 1924) "three associations have been formed during the past two years ..."; presumably EBBA was one of those to which Crosby thus referred. At any rate according to my memory, S. Prentiss Baldwin, Ohio's pioneer bird bander, came to New York and took a leading part in organizing the Eastern Bird Banding Association, contributing \$100 himself and securing a like contribution from two of his friends. Despite the flourish with which it started, EBBA also had its measure of hard going. During its first years I served as treasurer. After I relinquished this work, during a period of depression for the organization, I largely lost tabs on whatever measure of activity it maintained. I remember chancing to be in Philadelphia and dropping in on a meeting of EBBA one evening. In what year that was, again memory saith not. I remember that the late John Gillespie, also Brooke Worth whom I met then for the first time, with some ten others, were present.

In that period the knowledge of EBBA's members of its past history seemed rather sketchy. It appeared that the whereabouts of its early archives had become quite unknown. I located Rudyerd Boulton, who had served as secretary during my period as treasurer and found that he still had the missing records. These he gladly sent to me for restoration to the care (real care, let us hope) of EBBA.



It seems unfortunate that Cleaves rather than I had not been assigned to present a historical sketch of bird banding in its early days. He really lived with the banding of those times and could, without doubt, have given a much more complete account of bird banding history. However, having briefly glimpsed something of the infancy period of bird banding, we may I think feel that this activity has reached its maturity and has attained a sturdiness and supporting interest that will assure its continuing and increasingly valuable results.

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(The above paper was read by Beecher Bowdish at the EBBA Annual Meeting in April 1958. Howard Cleaves also spoke at this meeting, and if we can get him to set down on paper his memories of bird banding's infancy we shall hope to publish it in EBBA NEWS. --Ed.)

#### BIRD RINGING IN SOUTH AFRICA By C. Brooke Worth

Bird banding, or "ringing" as it is called in South Africa, is conducted privately although within the framework of laws for the protection of birds. Bands of sufficient size are inscribed, "Notify Pretoria Zoo." There is a central volunteer agency for correlating data. Bands are distributed to various bird clubs and individuals who are interested and qualified for carrying out various projects.

Within less than two weeks of my arrival here I had an opportunity to accompany a half dozen members of the Johannesburg Bird Club on a bird-watching and bird-ringing expedition to an area some 80 miles northwest of the city. This is an arid region, particularly so at present since it has not rained for almost five months. The rainy season is due to begin in about two or three weeks. We camped in a valley just south of some hills known as the Magliesberg Range. These hills rise rather steeply to within several hundred feet of their summit, where perpendicular cliffs surmount them. The face of the cliffs is broken into numerous irregular ledges, affording nesting sites for various kinds of birds.

The Bird Club group was headed by a real hot-shot young ornithologist, and he was assisted by a number of youths in their teens who ran up and down the ledges like mountain goats. In one morning they banded 103 fledgling Cape Vultures, Gyps coprotheres. In addition we observed Lanner Falcons, Black Eagles, Alpine Swifts and a Black Stork.