

BANDING SHOREBIRDS

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All too frequently shorebirds are ignored by most banders -- even in areas where such birds abound. This neglect should be rectified since these long distance fliers could provide many valuable recoveries. In most cases the lack of interest in shorebirds has stemmed from one or two unsuccessful banding attempts. The discouraged bander often decides to give up and go back to banding species that are easier to catch. Since many of the techniques and problems involved in catching shorebirds differ considerably from those used to catch land birds, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Special Problems

(1) Generally speaking, shorebird banding requires more experience and skill than banding land birds. Banders should be experienced netters before attempting to catch shorebirds. It is usually not advisable for a bander to attempt to catch shorebirds without at least one assistant. Two assistants are even better. A lone bander could easily be swamped if his nets fill up with flocks of birds while the tide is coming in. Fewer nets should be used.

(2) Equipment needed:

- (a) Hip boots
- (b) Battery operated headlamp
- (c) Penlight flashlight for emergency reserve. This can be clipped to sleeve at wrist or held in the mouth, thus leaving both hands free.
- (d) Mist nets of 2 3/8" mesh. The wing structure of most shorebirds makes them more difficult to remove from the smaller mesh nets. The 2 3/8" mesh will take the smallest shorebirds such as Least Sandpipers and also take many larger birds that would otherwise rip right through the more fragile smaller mesh nets. With the larger mesh most small "Peeps" can easily be removed from either side of the net which often saves a lot of time.
- (e) Net poles 8 to 10 feet long. Or regular poles used with weighted pole holders.
- (f) Field Guide (unless banders are thoroughly experienced in shorebird identification.) We use a Peterson guide with additional written notations for each species. Roberts Manual for the birds of Minnesota is an excellent source of additional information. Measurements, plumage notes, and peculiar characteristics can be written in the field guide. Typical timesavers include: Sanderling - no hind toe; Least Sandpiper - toes not webbed, small size; Golden Plover - no hind toe; Black-bellied Plover - small hind toe, black axillars, etc.

(3) Shorebird habitat usually presents problems that are not encountered in banding land birds.

- (a) Nets set on an open beach or mud flat are usually silhouetted against the sky making them more visible to the birds. Nets are least visible during early evening, just before dawn, and on cloudy days. In sandy locations sand colored nets are very effective.
- (b) Winds are always stronger along the waterfront. Strong and shifting winds are best handled by setting nets individually, i.e., independent of each other. Nets strung up together in a line are impossible to move quickly. Individual nets can be readily moved and adjusted to face into the wind.
- (c) Changing tides require moving nets frequently. Extra caution should always be used with an incoming tide. If a net is loaded with birds while the tide is rapidly coming in, the pole in deepest water should be pulled out and "walked" towards the beach, pivoting in a half circle, and then reset. Nets set when the tide is going out are less hazardous.
- (d) Shorebirds often travel in flocks. Nets set over water cannot be left untended even for a few minutes. The weight of a flock of shorebirds caught simultaneously can collapse a net, drowning many or all the birds. The lowest shelf of the nets should be at least 18 inches above the water. Birds caught in the lowest shelf are always removed first. Along the coast it is often not necessary to set nets directly over the water as the flocks of shorebirds usually fly along the shoreline in favorite feeding areas.
- (e) Soft mud and wet sand do not provide sturdy support for net poles. Nets may tend to sag even when empty. Longer poles can be set deeper and are best placed at an angle, tops of poles being farther apart than bottoms of poles. Weighted pole holders can be used also but these contraptions are difficult to transport and have a tendency to get stuck in the mud, making their removal a problem.
- 9f) Floating debris is another hazard that is often encountered. Banders should also be thoroughly familiar with the netting area and avoid all stationary booby traps such as posts, anchors, navigation markers, and any objects that are lodged in the mud. Netting area should be studied at low tide when such objects are clearly visible.

(4) Emergency Tactics

In the event that a whole flock of birds collapses a net the net should quickly be removed from the poles and carried to safer ground. (This is one of the reasons why it is essential to have an assistant.) Other nets should be quickly furled before tackling the collapsed net. If the larger mesh nets are used there is no need to try to open up the net. Just stretch it lengthwise on the ground in an area that is free

from shells, driftwood, and other debris. Dry sand should be avoided as the birds will scratch and get it in their eyes. Moist sand is ideal.

Even though a collapsed net may look like a hopeless mess, the birds are not difficult to remove. There is less chance of injury as they do not struggle much when they are on the ground. Any birds in obvious distress should be removed first. Next remove the jumpers, such as Ruddy Turnstones and other larger birds. Birds that tend to jump can cause injury to the other birds that are close to them. The small Sandpipers usually sit quietly on the ground and seldom struggle very much.

Early one evening we had a flock of 40 shorebirds collapse a net but using this method we had no casualties. Other than a few small abrasions all 40 birds were banded and released in good condition.

This type of incident clearly explains why efficiency, speed, and cooperative teamwork are particularly essential for successful shorebird banding.

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MEMORIAL FUND

Members of the Warburton family have given the largest contribution received to date (\$75.00) to EBBA's Memorial Fund in memory of Benjamin John Warburton, who died suddenly November 8, 1962.

All of us who knew and shared banding experiences with Ben Warburton cannot help but be pleased that this generous donation swells the Fund, the income from which will be used to stimulate research in the field of ornithology through the use of bird banding techniques.

