

READING BANDS THROUGH A TELESCOPE

By Eugene Eisenmann (reprinted from the Linnean News Letter)

A major problem in bird banding is the relatively small number of returns and recoveries of banded individuals. This is notably the case of birds banded on migration, rather less so of birds marked on winter quarters, and least so of breeding adults banded on the nesting grounds. Ordinarily the status of banded individuals depends on capture by trapping or netting or their discovery dead or dying. A recent article by C. Stuart Houston of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Blue Jay, 21 (2): 53-57, 1963) calls attention to the technique successfully used by R. F. Oldaker of Vancouver, British Columbia, to read gull bands. He goes regularly to the Vancouver City Dump and by studying the bands through a telescope has been able to report on over 1700 banded gulls of several species from 44 banding stations.

Mr. Oldaker uses a home-made telescope with an 81 mm. objective lens, usually with a 35X eyepiece, which can be replaced by eyepieces of 45X and 55X. For scanning the gulls to find banded individuals, a 7X monocular is attached to the telescope like the sight on a rifle. Reading the bands requires patience and good light. Mr. Oldaker can read a gull band with the naked eye at 3 to 4 feet, with an 8X binocular at 20 feet, and with his 35X telescope at 100 feet. The gulls at the Vancouver dump seem to recognize him and allow close approach. With the many dumps attracting gulls in the New York area, this technique should be workable hereabouts. Much information on wintering birds and their places of origin could be learned in this way. Any technique that facilitates the identification of individuals opens up means of attacking a variety of problems, besides the obvious ones relating to migration.

Even the rarity chaser may find such a study rewarding. The most likely extra-limital gulls are those in juvenal and immature plumages, whose identification is usually impracticable in the field. Yet it is the young birds that are most prone to wander long distances. Not infrequently, banding provides the only reliable record. For example, the first reports from Panama of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls and of the Caspian Tern were based on banded birds picked up by non-ornithologists. Large numbers of gulls are banded in Western North America, including such species as Glaucous-winged, California, Western, and Mew Gulls, which have never been recorded about New York. In Europe many gulls are banded, but the only species recorded on this side of the Atlantic are those readily identifiable, such as the adult Lesser Black-backed, Black-headed, and Little Gulls. Probably many gulls from the West and from Europe reach us in plumages that cannot be distinguished in the field (and often not certainly even in specimens). A systematic check for banded individuals would probably reveal that trans-continental and trans-Atlantic crossings are commoner than present records indicate. Our member, Dr. Neal G. Smith, during his study of Arctic gulls banded a number in the Canadian Arctic. It would be quite a coup if some local birder by reading a band discovered that one of Dr. Smith's gulls had followed him to a dump in his home borough of Brooklyn.