

SOME THOUGHTS ON RECOVERIES

By Jan Reese

Almost everyone assumes certain aspects of life and bird banders are no exception. I remember the first band recoveries I received after two years of banding - a Mourning Dove, a Green Heron, and a Barn Owl, all recovered within one mile of the original banding location. The following year recoveries came from Georgia, Massachusetts, and New York. Then, after four years of banding, I received a recovery from outside the North American continent. This recovery was anticipated since I had banded nearly 1,000 birds of three species known to winter south of the equator.

As time passed and the frequency of long distance and foreign recoveries increased I came to realize that the information gained from most of these recoveries was far from being complete. This was probably due, in part, to non-English-speaking recoverers and their unfamiliarity with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's banding scheme. Being extremely interested in my long distance band recoveries I thought it a good idea to attempt to acquire additional information for those whose information was incomplete.

My first few requests to recoverers produced little or no additional information and most of them proved futile, so I was somewhat dubious about continuing. Then, I received a reply from a Brazilian missionary who told of a band's actual recovery location being approximately 150 miles east of the postmark location used by the Banding Office on the recovery card. They had received only the band and the missionary's address. The errors revealed in this reply convinced me that perhaps other band recovery information was not as accurate as I had assumed it to be. It also provided justification for all previous information requests and gave impetus for continuing them in the future.

To date, I have followed up all interesting recoveries with requests for additional information. An overwhelming percentage of these requests has been very rewarding. Along with vivid recovery accounts, additional recovery information has been obtained (as shown above) as well as errors revealed in Banding Laboratory processing. For instance, a possible recovery location error was determined by correspondence with a recoverer who had found the banded dead bird wedged in the landing gear of a transport plane. Although the actual recovery was not unusual, the winter date and northern location was, since the species recovered is primarily a summer resident in the recovery location. The recoverer informed me that he had learned from airport flight records that the plane had just returned from a location below 32° north latitude, which would make it likely that the unusual recovery location, as reported, was invalid.

Another noteworthy error was revealed when the species identification made by a reputable recoverer disagreed with the recovery card which I had

received from the Banding Laboratory. After informing the Banding Laboratory of the difference, personnel there discovered that a digit in the band number had become transposed during the processing of the recovery. Thus the recovery card gave my banding data instead of the actual data for the correct band number.

I could give other examples of interesting, informative or error-revealing replies from recoverers; however, my suggestion here is that, as banders, we should not assume all Banding Laboratory recovery cards to be 100% correct. Also, one should never publish an unusual recovery without first having the Banding Laboratory check to assure its accuracy.

If you already follow up band recoveries with additional information requests or plan to do so in the future, undoubtedly you will find, as I have, that replies to these requests may be few and not all answers produce needed additional information. But when you learn of major additions or uncover errors, your efforts will be amply rewarded.

The Banding Laboratory is not equipped to prove all band recoveries valid beyond a doubt and any additional pertinent information you obtain, which discloses errors or fills gaps in the permanent records, should be brought to their attention. Caution and discretion should be used when interpreting additional information, because translations, time lapse, and unreliable correspondents can easily interject new errors.

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