

THE TAPE RECORDER AS A BANDING AID  
By Timo Tallgren

One can attract many species to the banding place by playing to them the song of the species in question or other calls. Above all, the finch-species migrating in flocks, for example the Siskins (Carduelis spinus), Redpolls (Acanthis flammea), Pine Grosbeak (Pinicola enucleator), and also Bohemian Waxwings (Bombycilla garrulus) answer very eagerly to the song and calls played to them, and come to the netting areas.

In 1967 the Siskin migration was later than normal and the migrating flocks appeared on the southern shore of Finland until the first half of October, when the seeds of birches and alders are already ripe. These are the chief food of Siskins in migration and being very dry, soon give the birds a strong thirst.

Hietaniemi is a large park in Helsinki where I banded at that time, and in this area there is only one little natural pond to which the birds often go in great flocks to drink. But Siskins came to drink usually in the afternoon while the time I could normally band was in the forenoon. I solved this problem with my tape recorder. About 7am., at sunrise, I set my mistnets around the pond and played their own calls to the Siskins sitting in nearby trees. I had recorded the song and calls from a phonograph record. It was not many minutes before the first flocks came in to drink. I always took the first five or six birds to use them as decoys and put them into a cage made of cloth net. When they began to call the other Siskins, one did not need the recorder any more.

In the first days the numbers were not great, only about 100 during the three hours I had in which I could band. October 16th, however, was a most unforgettable morning. I was then with my good friend Reijo Purasmaa in Hietaniemi and when the recorder-song was started, about 500 Siskins came to the pond. Our six nets were very soon so full of birds that no more could be entangled. We freed them with great haste and banded as rapidly as possible. A couple of similar flocks circled quite near to the pond. We had not yet removed all the birds, when the new flocks came notwithstanding, attracted by the caged birds, not minding that we were still there removing birds from the nets. The nets were soon full again.

We used two cages with five or six male Siskins in each, which we had found to be the best calling birds. These were changed every hour. There were surely over 1000 Siskins around the pond and all behaved as if in a trance. They flew quite blindly into the nets and seemed unafraid of us. In this way the birds were in the banding area for three hours and during this time we could not once get the nets empty. The result was fantastic - 402 Siskins banded in three hours by two banders, with six 6-metre nets. After this the birds disappeared and in all probability began their migration. I visited Hietaniemi nine times and got 1642 Siskins, and I am sure

the tape recorder had a very decisive importance just to attract the first birds which I could use as decoys.

This year we used the recorder in banding of different "night-singers". We have here in Finland some rare nesting warblers (genus Acrocephalus) which most usually sing toward midnight. They are "skulkers", keeping to thickets and patches of willows, and one can just never see them. The Nightingale (Luscinia luscinia) and the Grasshopper Warbler (Locustella naevia) are very similar skulkers as is, in different habitat, the Corn-crake (Crex crex) which breeds rarely in the grain fields in southern Finland. Because these species are so seldom banded - one or two a year - we decided to try to catch and band them.

In June 1969 we circled at night in the car around the best places of the southern shore and proceeded as follows. We would stop the car near a thick bushy area and play the song of different "night-singers" on the tape recorder, and if any male of one of these answered, as it would usually do if in the area, we went nearer to about 20 meters distance and set, as carefully and silently as possible, one or two nets between some separate bush and the main thicket. After this we played the song again from this bush and usually the singer was in the net within ten minutes. A second change is the recording on tape of the singer's own song because these masterly singers, which can readily imitate the songs of 40 or 50 species, are very individual in their songs.

The banding of Corncrakes is quite a different thing and, I think, the most interesting. This species is of the size of the Water Rail (Rallus aquaticus) and it lives in grain fields. Usually on a June night when the male is in good "singing spirits" its creaky voice is heard even at a distance of three kilometers (nearly two miles -Ed.). One can just never see the bird and only with the recorder have we gotten it in flight. When we have found where the Corncrake is, we advance carefully to within 50 meters of the bird and set three or four 10-meter nets one after another in a line, with bamboo poles we carry with us. Care must be taken that the ground does not quake when the poles are pushed in, as the bird might thus be driven away. When the nets are ready, one need only go behind the nets and play the bird's song so it flies up before long and usually comes to the net. It must be remembered that this operation is done at twilight and the crake cannot see the nets. On two occasions the bird did not fly up, and then we put the nets up so that the lower edges were on the ground and the bird was made to run into the net.

In June we found nine Corncrakes of which seven were banded. One individual was made to fly up from a little islet to a net on the mainland. The distance was over 150 meters so one can see that the attraction of the recorder-song is very effective. The numbers of birds banded are not great, owing to the rarity of the species involved, and are as follows:-

<u>Acrocephalus dumetorum</u>	2
" <u>palustris</u>	2
" <u>arundinaceus</u>	2
<u>Luscinia luscinia</u>	7
<u>Locustella naevia</u>	11
<u>Crex crex</u>	<u>7</u>
Total -	31

Another method I have used at times in good banding areas in thickets is that I have recorded on tape the call of the Red-backed Shrike (Lanius collurio) when the bird was in my hand. As is well known, the shrikes are hated by small birds such as warblers. When I played these calls in the banding area, before long all the nearby small birds were sitting curiously on the tops of the nearest bushes. One must put up the nets very high and one can be sure that many birds are often found in "empty" thickets.

(Ed. note: We have seen this method work remarkably while birding at Cape May this autumn: a mid-morning Screech Owl turned out to be a birder with a portable tape recorder - surrounded, after a few minutes of playing, by a large and varied assortment of birds. Such a method ought to be effective in enlivening a "noonday lull" at O.R. stations, among its many possibilities.)

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