

THE CASE FOR SERENDIPITY  
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Alexander Bergstrom and the other experts are right when they stress the planning of banding projects. What follows is not intended to challenge or refute that emphasis. But it is a fact that projects planned in advance may backfire, while apparently aimless banding may lead to significant discovery. This, I think, is often true in the case of beginners, particularly when they are not located on major flyways.

When my husband and I started banding over forty years ago, the idea was to band whatever you could get. However, we weren't quite so naive as to think that the main idea was to decorate the bird, and we looked eagerly for returns and recoveries.

There was then a fairly wild, wooded ravine adjoining our property. In autumn we placed traps on the near slope of the ravine and caught a few dozens of migrating White-throated Sparrows. There were also wintering flocks of this species. After some years of amassing banding data we tabulated the results. This seems to me a fine method of finding out whether or not you have significant leads. From a study of our charted data we developed some theories about the migration trends of this species.<sup>1</sup> This was pure serendipity. We had caught and banded the birds just because they were there.

In time I was inspired to plan a project in advance, choosing the Carolina Wren for my victim.<sup>2</sup> And do you know what happened? There came a series of severe winters that wiped that species right off our local map for an appreciable length of time. Its numbers have never been as common since. The worst of this discouraging fiasco was that I had given advance advertisement of my intentions.

For some years we had Crested Flycatchers nesting in a bird shelter attached to the wall of our house. This was a made-to-order project, and we concentrated on a fairly intensive study of the current family year after year.<sup>3</sup> In those days before mist nets, we were able to catch the adults by putting insect nets over the opening. We could trace the birds from year to year by means of colored bands. This project was a pure gift of the gods.

Eventually my husband spent less time on "backyard banding" and more on expeditions to band birds of prey and colony nesters because they provided more data through recoveries. As a stay-at-home baby sitter I still thought highly of the backyard, and banded what I could get when I could get it.

Today civilization has encroached on the ravine. White-throats no longer make migration stop-overs, though there are still winter visitors. Perhaps there is nothing more to be learned from them, but who knows? The same question arises in the case of Cardinals and Tufted Titmice. Both species are supposed to be non-migratory. I even wrote an article about the distribution of Titmice.<sup>4</sup>

Since then tits have been recovered further away than I expected. One was taken by Raymond Middleton, seventeen miles away as the legendary Crow flies; and one was taken by Paul Fluck, at twice that distance. I wouldn't have discovered this if I hadn't continued to band Titmice year after year.

Formerly there had been an apparent tendency of Titmice to occupy the ravine one year and move to another area perhaps a mile away the next year and then return the third. Now they stay near by all the time.

Although the encroachments of building developments have caused the disappearance of the wilder species like Chats and Kentucky Warblers which used to nest in the ravine, the less wary species have become more closely concentrated in the wooded remnants. There never used to be Redwings nearby, but now they are common winter residents. And in very recent years Cowbirds have been increasing alarmingly. They wouldn't be my first choice; I'd much prefer more esthetic species. But they are here; I can't keep them away. They are ridiculously easy to catch in traps. So, without any planned project, I am banding them. Already I find theories as to their distribution suggesting themselves. If anything comes of this it will be due to serendipity. And if nothing comes of it, well - do all planned projects jell?

It would be silly for a bander to haunt the north woods until he finds, say, a nesting warbler; and then to climb the tree and band it just to add to the number of species on his banding list. Mr. Bergstrom and I are in perfect agreement here. It would be just about as silly to find that very warbler in your net and release it unbanded. I'm sure we still agree. He is accenting one phase, and one which should be accented. I claim another phase is legitimate. (See Mr. Bergstrom's article, "Planning and Carrying Out Projects as a Bander" Workshop Manual Vol. 2, 1963; reprinted in EBBA News Vol. 26, No. 5 - Sept.-Oct. 1963. -Ed.)

Everyone will, I'm sure, agree that he cannot always know whether a certain phase of banding activity is worthwhile or not. I recall a weary expedition Grace Meloney and I made after fledgling Common Terns. For two or three hours we trudged through sand dunes, and each of us found exactly twelve young to band. "This," I declared, "isn't worth the effort. I won't come here again!" But in less than a year one of my 12 was recovered in French Guiana.

Circumstances do not always permit the carrying out of projects we would like to pursue. Also, we cannot always conjure up in advance the trends and theories that accumulated data may suggest. I claim there is a good case for banding which is unmotivated at the moment.

Never underestimate the power of serendipity!

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