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The Future of Passerine Banding
 By: Edward T. Reed

The banding of passerine birds by amateur ornithologists represents one of the greatest potentials for ecological research ever known. No other scientific discipline has as much highly qualified assistance available from non-professionals. Unfortunately, there exists a wide gap between the current banding picture and the expression of this potential.

Let us be honest, most of us band simply as a hobby, we do it because it is fun and also because it represents the ultimate status for an amateur ornithologist. But stop for a moment and consider how much of your banding effort has ever contributed to our understanding of birdlife. Are you banding for any reason other than the enjoyment you receive?

There appears to be one major goal among banders today - that is to band as many birds as possible of the greatest number of species. Just pick up any issue of EBBA NEWS and note the number of comments pertaining solely to the number of birds banded. There is seldom any mention of why these vast quantities of birds were banded. Admittedly, passerine banding has provided constant improvement in aging and sexing techniques. However, beyond that, passerine banding has developed into an aimless hobby for a few privileged citizens.

This may appear to be an exaggerated statement of the type which is easily dismissed as totally ridiculous, but if you were told to justify your banding or surrender your permit, how would you respond? What would you say? To what worthwhile results would you point? Would the objectives of your banding program appear valuable enough to merit the continuing the privilege you now hold? In summary, the current status of banding is characterized by a lack of goals or objectives and if attacked, is utterly defenseless.

What are acceptable objectives for banding? Let us start with an excellent example of a bad objective. I am referring to the banding of large numbers of passerine birds during spring and fall migrations. The amount of information gained by this approach is minimal at best and is certainly not worth the expended effort. On the other hand, a valid objective can be defined as one which provides information relevant to our understanding of avian ecology, behavior, or population dynamics. It should also be mentioned that educational banding provides a valuable community service and is thus a good example of banding with an important purpose.

We must begin to move away from the archaic idea that banding is only a hobby. There must be a shift towards directing our banding energy into

worthwhile research. To fail to do so will not only represent a great waste but may be considered as a valid reason to discontinue passerine banding.

A compromise must be struck somewhere between the hobbyist and the professional. I feel that EBBA has the machinery with which such a change can be realized. Let me propose just one of many possible fashions by which this might be achieved. First of all, we need an objective. Example: let us say that we want to determine the basic population dynamics of one particular species, or a group of species if you prefer, or maybe certain species in a particular geographic area. This goal would in turn generate a multitude of questions which can be considered as sub-objectives such as what densities are normal for this species in various habitats, do populations fluctuate or cycle, what is the usual mortality rate of the various age classes and what environmental factors are critical in influencing the answers to these questions. The successful satisfaction of goals of this nature will provide us with a more complete picture of the life history of birds. It will also give us an idea of what is "normal" thus providing criteria against which the impact of environmental changes can be measured. How can one tell what effect an environmental factor is having if you do not know what is "normal" for the species in question.

Assuming that definite objectives have been selected, what is now needed is professional guidance to plan the collection of data and to provide answers and assistance to cooperating members. This person would then be responsible for the final step - publishing the results so that the information becomes available to the public and the scientific community.

Which objectives will be selected, who will function as leaders for each study and how will interested EBBA members become active participants? These are all questions which must be handled by the EBBA leadership. Without their cooperation and organizational guidance, such an endeavor is doomed.

In summary what is proposed is that bird banders, starting with EBBA members, discard traditional attitudes and goals and take the first step to change bird banding from its current level which basically is not much above being a goal-less harassment of birds to valuable goal-oriented attempt to further man's knowledge and understanding of birdlife.

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