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# The human side of bird banding

H. Elliott McClure

In our sophisticated system of banding, the ringer never gets to see the fascinating letters that go with the recovered rings. Or maybe the American hunter and occasional ring finder is so blasé that he just sends the ring to the Fish and Wildlife Service or information about it without adornment. All the ringer gets is a callous impersonal report card or sheet listing the information. I used to add a little romance to this by immediately writing to the recoverer for more information. This sometimes led to some interesting correspondence.

When the Migratory Animals Pathology Survey (*Ed: Southeast Asia*) began in 1963, we did not anticipate the flood of letters that we eventually received — letters written in fifteen languages from as many nationalities and ethnic groups. The reasons why the ring finder does or does not report it are manifold, and maybe we will discuss them at another time. As the months went by, I was fascinated by the contents of the letters that we received. As each letter with its gay array of stamps or its distinctive penmanship appeared before me, I anticipated not only its scientific potential to hold valuable information, but also viewed each as a tiny window of human interest and endeavor.

The Filipinos were the most articulate of the nationalities that recovered our rings. They are a fearless, inquisitive and acquisitive lot and plied us with numerous requests and supplications.

In our headlong rush through this materialistic world one of the qualities of life that we are losing is the ability to experience and respond wholeheartedly and in wonder to the exciting and unusual moments of life. Hundreds of the letters from the Philippines told of the ambitions and hopes of the people, of their needs and deeds, and above all there was a poignant humanness through them. This was especially true since these are a proud but effervescent people motivated by devotion to God and their families and encircled by the harsh restrictions of an overpopulated land.

I have selected ten letters which tell as many stories. There are hundreds more like these. They asked me to play Santa Claus to their children,

they had heard about others who had recovered rings and wanted to join the club, they prayed to God and slaughtered His creatures in same breath. The letters were, in short, tiny dramas of the cross section of Filipino life. Ten letters are only a fascinating taste but are all that this brief report would allow.

I know that my readers will respond differently to these letters, some seeing their pathos and humour, others reflecting upon the sad fate of migrant birds that reach these seven thousand islands. I did not make them up. They are reproduced or typeset as they appeared in the original handwriting. They were solicited only in that each ring had a serial number and the words "Write P.O. Box 3443, Hong Kong, B.C.C." Many are typewritten, even by the poor farmer who could not own a typewriter, for throughout Asia there are, in the villages, streetside secretaries who will type a letter for one. This fee and the hardship of devoting money for a stamp made many of the letters even more meaningful. Many letters were written by school children who had learned English and who prepared the letters for other members of the family less conversant in English.

First, a fairly straight-forward report about an Emerald Dove (*Chalcophaps indica*) by a farmer who decorated his letter with an explanatory sketch.

2 Mar 1972

To whom it may Concern;  
Sir or madam,

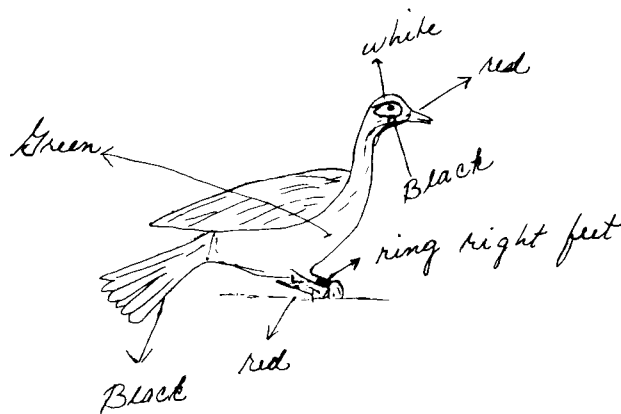
I am very glad to write you a short line because of this having'ly secret of bird, a bird that has a secret ring on his right feet, the address of the ring is P.O. Box 3443 060-28794 Hong kong B.C.C. So I write you directly to this address to report this bird and what does it matter.

Sir, I was only a farmer that have the age of (25) twenty five years old. I live on a small barrio of Umingan, Pangasinan, P.I. I catch this bird with my air gun. It is yet alive before I mailed this letter. I

don't know if this bird will die or not. The color of this bird is green and has a small white on his head & black. his bill is red. and his name of us on the Philippine is wild dove, Here I explain with the drawing at back.

**Name** O.J.  
**(sex)** married  
**Barrio** Luna Wiste  
**Town** Umingan  
**Province** Pangasinan  
**Philippine Island**

The dove had been ringed 17 months before at Dalton Pass, 20 miles north of his village. These doves do wander, but no migration patterns have yet developed from the study.



Wild Dove

Birds were recovered under strange conditions.

San Jose Est. Dumaguete city  
 Negros Oriental,  
 Philippines  
 March 28, 1965.

Dear Friends,

I am sending you this letter because of a certain reason. I found your bird. But before talking about it, I'll introduce first myself to you.

I am a thirteen-year young Filipino born on January 18, 1952 in the town of Zamboanguita, Negros Oriental, Philippines. I finished my primary education in one of the primary schools in my hometown. Later, we moved to Dumaguete city the capital city of Negros Oriental and studied there in the "East Visayan School of Arts and Trades." Well I told you some things about myself. Now let's go back to the bird.

It was Sunday, March 28 at 8:00 in the morning. It was a beautiful sunny day that most of the people went to sea to take a bath. We enjoyed running and playing on the sand. We were also swimming in the blue sea. Just then the sky grew dark and the blue sea became brown. Other people went home. After a while there were pieces of wood and leaves floating. "Perhaps flood ~~is~~ coming from the rivers," I wondered. Then the waves of the sea became larger. At that

moment I realized that there was a flood coming from Apo island, a little island just a distance a little distant from Negros Island. I looked farther and farther until I saw a large broken log. There was something standing on it. I tried to reach for the log and I found out that the thing standing on it was a living thing, a very weak bird. Its wings hung to its legs. I brought it home and gave it some food but it refused to eat. I inspected carefully and I found out that it had a wound on its breast. I also found a ring on one of the legs bearing these words:

Write P.O. Box 3443  
 070- 10401  
 HONG KONG B.C.C.

I didn't waste time. I wrote to you right away. Then the next morning I woke up early to see the bird but I found it dead. Maybe because of the pain and hunger. That bird had done its great work. It is like a hero. The picture of that bird is still in my mind and I'll never forget it. I think I told you the whole story now.

If you can still remember please tell me all about the bird before they were sent.

May God bless you and me and give you good health.

Your friend,

This was another dove, the Javanese Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia bitorquata*) which had been ringed

only three months before about 35 miles south in Siaton, Negros Oriental.

He was terrified when he shot the bird, but not too terrified to write.

Mr. A.Z.  
October 11, 1972  
Bacolod City

P.O. Box 3443  
060-18869  
Hongkong, B.C.C.

Sir:

This is my first time, that I shot a bird with a ring through-out my life. On the first place when we go hunting, people saying that the place is so enchanted that one hunter by the name of Sandro shot a big bird and die on the spot. likewise to Miguel this encident was also happened.

These humors are knownd by every person living in that barrio. So, When I shot that bird "Saling" (Color-black, no feather round the eyes, calig communication, ing, ing, ing, black- feet and beak)

I recall these humors, My whole body trmbled waiting that I will die, but we stayed on that place for three days, We went home and nothing happened to me. I examined the ring, I saw, "Write P.O. Box 3443. Commanding to to write, So I wrote this letter thinking that it will give me a charm.

Very respectfully yours,  
AZ

This, a Coletto (*Sarcops calvus*), is a large bizarre starling which is indigenous to the Philippines and non-migratory. This one had been ringed in May 1967 a few miles from where it was shot. It had been captured once before, a month after it was banded, and the trapper had released it after recording the ring, but this time it was not so lucky. It had survived 65 months since being ringed.

We even got letters from young secretaries.

Republic of the Philippines  
Municipality of Italyat  
Province of Batanes  
March 13, 1970

To my unknown Friend:

I'm glad to let you know that I caught a bird wearing a ring wherein I got your address. But at first I was reluctant to write for fear that You'll not answer it. I'm still keeping your bird's ring.

If you want to know more about me, I'm a Filipina Girl, 22 yrs. old and at present the Mayor's Secretary in the Municipality of Itlayat. I'm a Roman Catholic. I'm living with my parents and I

have only one sister and no brother. My sister is 27 yrs. old and married to an American and presently residing at Florida, Miami. My hobbies are pen-pal writing, reading & collecting dolls.

How about you? I would be very glad if you'll write me so that I'll know about you. Send me also a photo of yours and I will send mine next mail.

This is all for now & hoping for your answer.

Your pen-pal  
V.R.

No mention of the bird, but often the ring number was included in the address on the envelope. She failed to tell us how she got the bird, but the usual Philippine use of the English word "caught" meant "shot." Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) are not easily caught by our definition. This was a yearling from a colony in Tokyo, having stopped at this tiny island in the seas north of the Philippines (Batanes Province) on its way home for its first breeding season.

Oddly enough a biologically minded collector got this one.

Boac, Marinduque 201-E  
Philippines April 26, 1972

P.O. Box 3443  
050 - 28508  
Hongkong B.C.C.

Dear Sirs:

This is to inform you that last April 24 Monday I went to a small interior barrio of Tugos, Boac, Marinduque province, southern Luzon, around 40 to 60 miles south of Manila to discover that a bird bearing the above address was seen perching a tree near one of the clustered houses. A ring was taken from the feet of the bird which was shot by a small boy with a slingshot using a small stone pebble. The bird was said to look like a kingfisher which is however foreign to them. The bird was shot April 21 Friday noon and was found the following day dead Saturday early in the morning April 22.

I am a Naturalist collecting all kinds of biological items land marine and freshwater reptiles, amphibians, cicadas, butterflies, moths, katydids, locusts, scorpions, spiders, beetles, earwigs, leafinsects, bugs, fleas, lice, ticks, dragonflies, damsels and all other insects as well as leeches, marine starfishes, and many others. Also all kinds of snakes, lizards, turtles, frogs (hyla and rana) typhyllops etc. I am a shell dealer for over 12 years and have started to offer all biological items (preserved) for two years now. Birds is the only

one I have not taken in my business though I have a number of stuff birds as a collection.

The man who gave me the above information about the bird bearing the above address is Faustino Isole of Tugos, Boac, Marinduque who told me about the find. I only came to the place two days after the bird was killed. I have read similar incidents of birds found in some part of the Philippines loosed from some museums and zoos in the United States purposely to find out how these birds migrate for scientific study.

I am reporting the matter to you for the address inscribed in the ring has this note: Write: P.O. Box 3443 050-28508 Hongkong B.C.C.

Sincerely yours,  
L.R.

It was a White-collared Kingfisher (*Halcyon chloris*) which had been ringed nearby on Marinduque island about 28 months before. These are coastal kingfishers that wander widely and cross from island to island.

People are curious about the actions of others as this young lady tells.

Lopez Sugar Central  
Fabrica, Negros Occ.  
Philippines  
July 13, 1970

Dear Someone,

Here's a friend who wrote you a letter informing you about a strange incident that happened here in our place in the Philippines. At first I was so reluctant to write in this mailbox because I don't know whom to write on, but I was encouraged by my auntie that somebody would dare to write me back in case this all come true.

Well, to begin with the story, somebody in our place go hunting. He shot a bird with an aluminum ring on one of the birds' leg. He was so afraid that the bird was owned by a strange person he let the bird flew but took the ring in the birds' leg and throw it near my auntie's house. So curious about that things my aunt picked that ringbird and brought it to me to be read.

In front of that ring lies a number like this: 040 17983

Inside I read: Write  
Box 3443  
Hongkong

So, therefore we concluded that somebody in your

place owned that kind of bird and brought it here in the Philippines, (if I were not mistaken.)

Right now if this is true I'm glad to know somebody in this place. Well, before I forgot let me introduced to you my name. I am L.C., a pure Filipina, with a fair complexion. Standing 5'4" bare-footed, weighing 100 lbs. Maybe that will give you a hence how your writer look like.

Here I drop, hoping to know the result of this curiosity.

Regards to everybody.

A New friend,  
L.C.

The bird was a Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus*) more than four years old. These nest somewhere in northern China, no word has come to us where, and each fall they move across the straits from China to the southern tip of Taiwan. They are harvested for food by the thousands there before they can move on to the Philippines where there is more slaughter. Our informant did not tell us when the bird was shot, but it must have been several months before she wrote the letter since no shrikes remain at these latitudes after April.

The capture of a young Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) from a colony in Taiwan is told in the following:

Lucbon, Abulug, Cag.  
Oct. 17, 1966

Dear Brother,

I am glad to inform you that I am the lucky man who caught your favorite pet "the white heron" which had traveled a long way from here to bind us together by knowing you through letters.

Brother, maybe this is a luck because before the night of catching the said bird I had had a very nice dream. I dreamed that I had been flying high above the cloud and there I met thousands of airplane. One of this airplane came towards me and I caught it by the tail and then wake up. I found out that it was only a dream.

Brother in the morning I went to the field to pasture my only carabao. There I saw many "white heron" near it. When I come nearer the birds flew away. But one tried to fly, but it could not. So I rushed up to see what happen. There I found out that it was tied up by the trap of small boys. When I removed the string I found out that on the foot theres the ring which says "Write" and its address. So I even shouted with joy. For at last I had found a friend from abroad.

Brother I'm now closing with thought that I return you will tell or relate me the story why and what cause you to do this. And what will be the reward of one who could catch one of your pet.

Your New Brother  
T.P.

People of S.E. Asia are fun loving and this was an occasion for a party.

Bato, Camarines Sur  
Philippines  
January 8, 1969

P.O. Box 3443  
Hong Kong B.C.C.  
100-38606

Sir:

This is to send you the news about the heron which was hunted by me sometime in January 1, 1969 in Bato Lake, this Municipality in the early morning of that date at around 8:00 o'clock.

I was alone engaged in my pastime hunting wild birds especially this season when I happened to hit with my shot gun No. 6935, caliber 12 g.a. and under license no. 85361 this rare specie in our soil. Thinking that the bird was still alive, I hit it against a tree-trunk and later on discovered that a ring is fastened in one of its legs bearing an inscription, namely:

WRITE P.O. BOX 3443  
Hong Kong B.C.C.  
100-68606

This inscription coming from a far-off country interest me so much that I immediately informed the Municipal Mayor, Atty. Ernesto Tino of this municipality and conveyed to him this incident. He advised me to write directed to the address indicated in the ring hence this letter.

Surprised of this feat and luck of having hunted a unique bird which to me seems to come from another country, I gathered my friends to cause for an informal celebration in my residence in the form of eating, drinking etc. It was really a nice gathering all for the cause of the "bird" with a "ring." All of my friends were made to guess what the gift or reward would be for this lucky hunter, who incidentally happens to be the writer and sender of this letter. Just what would happen to this letter, I expect something wonderful will provide us a little bit of elation if perchance our longing and expectation would be rewarded at least.

In this big gap which keeps up apart geographically, perhaps this bird "heron" was intended to convey a message of goodwill especially so that this "messenger" across the the sea came to our shores on the very first day of the new year 1969.

I, therefore, would be expecting so much from your reply to bridge our gap between loving countries Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Truly yours,  
N.J.

The "messenger" that got eaten was a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) only six months old which had been ringed as a nestling at a colony in central Taiwan.

Another Coletto was reported by this plaintive letter from a college student. Mindanao is strife ridden with conflicts between the Christians and the Muslims. The Mindanao State University had been under seige by Muslims at the time that she wrote her letter and it was more than a year before we located the bird's records. Cotabato has recently (August 1976) been in the news because of destruction from a tidal wave from earthquakes.

Miss F.M.  
Cotobato City  
May 22, 72

Dear Sir

Above all things . . . greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus. And I hope that as this letter of mine arrives you . . . You're in the best of health & of good cheer.

I am just but a mere college student this coming opening of this school year 1972, who has been striving hard so I can continue my study this opening & fortunately . . . I should say It is heaven for me . . . Because you know I have been praying to God that I could continue my study but I'm wondering on how to continue my study, parents are very poor and we are 10 in all in the family. But when I saw your bird having a tag I say to myself. .Oh God!. . how wonderful . . . is thy creature. Really I need somebody to help me that would do something for my brighter future and I hope and I'm sure, your kind and warm hearted cooperation and consideration on this letter would led me to success, someday. I thank you And may the Lord will blessed you more.

Very Respectfully,  
(Miss) F.M.

The next young man was very original.

San Jose City A-625  
Philippines  
August 28, 1972

P.O. Box 3443  
060-29676  
Hong Kong B.C.C.

To whom it may concern:

Whoever you may be, I am sure that you own the bird that I incidentally caught alive because around its foot, there is a silver ring engraved with your address. If your place could be reached by bus, I would have returned it by this time, but Hongkong is far from the Philippines, thus I have no other alternative but to inform you its whereabouts.

If the bird was intentionally set free for some reasons, I wish to inform your honor that I will be very willing to cooperate in realizing the purpose in doing such, and if it was lost and luckily reached our beloved country, please advise me how to return it to you. However, I doubt if it will stay alive longer in a cage but I will take good care of it.

When I noticed the ring around its foot, I really was surprised for this is my first time to catch such a privately owned bird inside a forest where hunting is tolerated by our government.

My 7-year old brother advised me to return it by mail, but I told him that the Bureau of Customs prohibits birds inside an envelope.

I asked the permission of my mother to sell our house and lot for me to raise the amount in going to Hong Kong, but my mother ran after me and gave me a dozen or two son-of-a-bits expressions.

It's really funny that I came to recall the poem that runs this way:

I shot an arrow into the air  
It fell to earth, I knew not where,  
For so swiftly it flew, the sight  
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,  
It fell to earth, I knew not where,  
For who has sight, so keen and strong,  
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak,  
I found the arrow still unbroke,  
And the song, from beginning to end,  
I found again in the heart of a friend.

Now I can say:

Long long afterward in a forest,  
I found the bird still at rest,  
And the ring, engraved with an address,  
Is still there, not yet erased.

Pardon me for making my letter a bit informal because I believe that when friends meet, there must be some cracks, or else the meeting will be dry. This letter came from your friend in the Philippines and it carries goodwill to you and to your countrymen.

Hanaggang sa mule. (Till the next time) I naasahan hong tutugunin ninijo ang ahing leham. (I hope for a reply). I dinadalengin ha ang patuloy na pagunlod ng injong bousa. (I pray that your nation be prosperous and progressive) Pagpalain nama kaip ng Maykapal. (May God bless you)

Your friend  
R.T.

And the bird was a Slaty-breasted Rail (*Rallus striatus*) which had been ringed ten months before at Dalton Pass 25 miles north. Several species of rails live in the Philippines and move north and south with the seasons, but not leaving the islands. *Striatus* appears to follow rice cultivation north and south since it is an insect feeder. They will also be found along streams in the cut-over forests.

The mountain peoples of Luzon are known as the Igorots. They cultivate the hillsides by terracing them, and they obtain much of their proteins by hunting and trapping. The remarkable young man whose first letter follows has since become chief of police of his small village. We have had several letters from him as he has found rings among the hunters of his area. This bird that he reports was a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) which had been ringed as a nestling in Taiwan in 1966. So it was eight years old and had managed to avoid Filipino hunters for as many winters.

Imugan, Santa Fe,  
Nueva Vizcaya  
November 11, 1974

100-17217

Dear Sir,

Prior I proceed my letter may I greet you first say good morning or good afternoon.

I send this short note ain of the bird, because it is already came here in the Philippines like here in my place of Barrio Imugan, Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya. When I go up to the forest I see a died bird hanging on the tree. When I see the big bird died, I

claimed the tree in I get the bird died after I can't get, I see the big ring and their legs. So cant writing you. Sir please excuse me because don't know how speak English because I am a cultural-minorities or Igorots or natives peoples So excuse me. THATS ALL and God Bless you always and merry Christmas to you all.

T.T.

(Ed. note: Dr. McClure was president of W.B.B.A. in 1949 and 1950. He comments: "Glad to see that the North American Bird Bander is finally an actuality. A combined journal of the banding associations was a subject of considerable discussion when I was president of WBBA 27 years ago, so it took a quarter of a century to realize it.")

69 E. Loop Drive, Camarillo, CA 93010

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## Turkey Vulture banding problem

Ranger Ed Henckel

Band size 7B, recommended by the Bird Banding Laboratory, has been proved to be detrimental to the legs and feet of the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*).

Because of Turkey Vultures' unusual manner of excreting down their legs, the 7B band (which fits well on initial installation) will, after a period of six to eight weeks, load-up with excrement which solidifies. Swelling of the lower leg and foot ensues, compounding the restriction, leading to loss of the use of the leg and/or foot.

Since size 8 bands are deemed to be too large, cut-down 8 bands are being tested until the issuance, by the Banding Lab., of a band size between 7B and 8. (Ed. note: see NABB Vol. 1:2, p. 89). It may be proved, for the sake of the birds, that Turkey Vultures should not be leg-banded because of their manner of excreting.

This report is based on personal observations made during the past year in which more than seventy Turkey Vultures were banded and four-

teen were recaptured. The fourteen birds recaptured all showed restrictions so were rebanded with cut-down 8 bands on the opposite leg. The 7B bands were removed and the legs successfully treated with Betadine.

Observations of known 7B-banded birds in flight have shown birds with feet so swollen that they were unable to tuck the foot against their bodies, out of the slipstream, undoubtedly hindering their flight. The roost capabilities of these birds was not observed.

A bird banded with a 7B band at Stanhope, N.J., 13 June 1975 was recaptured in Grant, Florida, 30 November 1975 with such a badly damaged foot that amputation was done. The bird was found on the ground.

All of these Turkey Vultures were also tagged with a numbered red streamer on the right wing and sighting reports would be appreciated. Reports will be forwarded to the Bird Banding Laboratory.

Waterloo Rd., Stanhope, NJ 07874 (EBBA)

