
Cardinals remove their bands

J.D. Copeland

One year recently I banded 354 Cardinals. I felt that this was some kind of a record; the newspapers apparently thought the same. The publicity director of Erskine College at Due West, South Carolina (a small town in the extreme western part of South Carolina), where I was teaching at the time, took my picture while banding a Cardinal. In front of me was one of W.K. Bigger's two-cell, Potter-type traps with another Cardinal awaiting banding. He sent the picture to the Greenville News and several other nearby newspapers. Along with the picture was a report of my banding fifty other species. The Greenville News ran the picture three columns wide. After that the article appeared in four or five Southeastern states.

When I told about this 354 Cardinal record at a meeting of the Eastern Bird Banding Association, Mr. Hood of the Bird Banding Laboratory deflated my report by informing me that Cardinals remove their bands. He suggested that I check on the extent of removals by clipping a feather in the wings and tail that would identify birds previously banded.

I started this means of identification by clipping the last three numbers of the band out of two wings and tail, by counting in so many feathers for each number. The plan worked fairly well. Of course, the identification lasted only until the next molt, but this proved long enough to draw some conclusions on the percentage of bands removed. Of 160 Cardinals banded between January and May, over a period of several years, 50 were repeats during the five month period. Of these repeats 10 were found unbanded but identified as being previously banded. This seems to show that 20 percent of Cardinals remove their bands. It is my opinion that this percentage is much too high. It was affected by one season in which very few birds repeated, the majority of which had removed their bands. In one year I had almost 50 percent repeats with only 3 percent removals.

After my experience with the Cardinals, I began to wonder how many other birds remove their bands. I recently caught a Screech Owl in a mist net; one month later I caught it again — it was still wearing its band. I have caught and banded two Loggerhead Shrikes. Each got caught in a two-cell Potter trap while trying to catch a Field Sparrow in

the opposite cell. Both shrikes returned to the yard several times, still wearing their bands. One would think that such birds with beaks equipped to tear their prey to pieces could easily remove their bands. One of these shrikes became such a problem that I started transporting it away from the house; I caught it three times. A few miles was not enough; it took nine miles to make it stay away.

My latest problem was an American Kestrel which nearly ended my small-bird banding project by chasing them all away. I first observed it attacking a Field Sparrow in a Potter trap. It was not long before it was in the other cell. Even so, it caught the Field Sparrow and pulled it through the wire to its cell and devoured it. When banded and released, it stayed in the yard! It was too smart to get trapped a second time, but every so often I would see it in the trees around the house or flying through the yard. I was not able to see a band on its leg through my field glasses. American Kestrels are so rare around here that I hardly think a second hawk showed up. I feel reasonably sure that it removed the band.

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Undergraduate grant

The Eastern Bird Banding Association is again sponsoring a \$250.00 grant for an undergraduate or graduate student in a recognized college or university in the Western Hemisphere for research in ornithology involving bird banding. Applicants should submit a resumé of their planned project to: Dr. Bertram G. Murray, Jr., 249 Berger St., Somerset, NJ 08873. The deadline for receipt of completed applications is 15 March 1977.