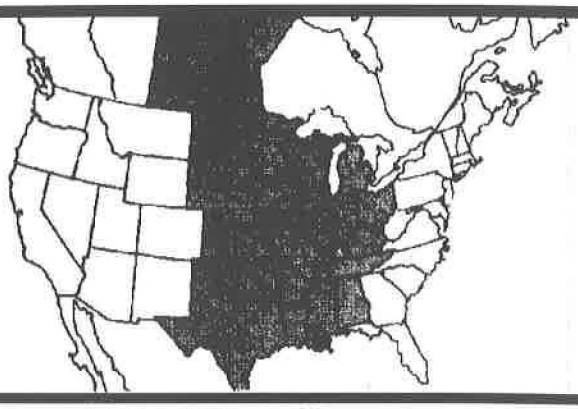

Inland Regional News

Inland Bird Banding Association **Founded 1922**

Saskatchewan's Turkey Vulture Wing-Tagging Project - 2009

The following information may be of interest to any bander interested in enlisting rural residents in nest-finding, to those wishing to learn about the potentials and the downsides of wing-tagging, and to behaviorists interested in a species that has adapted, since 1983 in Saskatchewan, to using deserted buildings as a new and very different but now much preferred nest site.

Until the 1980s, most known Turkey Vulture nests in Saskatchewan were in good-sized caves, in the badlands of the south, and along major river valleys (see maps in Houston et al. 2007). In 2002, the unprecedented finding of three active Turkey Vulture nests in deserted buildings in the Saskatoon Bird Area, within cropland areas of Aspen Parkland, aroused our interest (Houston et al. 2002). Unable to use aluminum leg bands because vulture excreta hardens around such bands and damages the tarsus (Henckel 1976, Houston and Bloom 2005), the banding office assigned us white alpha-numerics on green Herculite tags (Houston and Terry 2003). The Saskatchewan Turkey Vulture Tagging Project began in 2003.

The first requisite was to have someone learn wing-tagging. Peter Bloom agreed to provide the instruction. Brent Terry visited Pete in Orange County, CA, in June 2003. Brent watched Pete apply a tag and then applied one under his supervision (the long-standing "see one, do one, teach one"). Brent returned and a month later taught his new skill to Marten Stoffel and Mike Blom. The three of them have since taught these skills to banders Ric Morse and Wayne Nelson in Alberta, who in 2008 began an Alberta wing-tagging program, using black letters but no numbers on bright yellow tags.

Large rolls of herculite are purchased from Gary's Upholstery, Tampa, FL. Tags are then manufactured by Suncan Industries, Saskatoon, SK. The high-grade white paint has maintained its brightness, like new, for six years to date. The Turkey Vulture Tagging Fund of Nature Saskatchewan pays for the herculite and the manufacture of the wing tags. The cost of the rotary punches, the All-flex ear tag connectors, vehicle upkeep, gas and oil for 9285 km in 2008 and 9963 km in 2009, together with lodging and meals, are borne by the master permittee, amounting to more than $32.88 per nestling vulture wing-tagged in 2009. An expensive hobby, even for a retired medical doctor.

Thanks to media publicity and the remarkable efforts of friendly and interested farmer observers, particularly Don Forbes of Porcupine Plain, results have exceeded our fondest hopes. Don Forbes visited 20 deserted buildings in 2005 to find four active nests, then 40 buildings to find eight active nests in 2006. In both 2008 and 2009, Don had 18 vultures banded in the 10 nests he had found. This technique of enlisting farmers had been successful from 1958 through 1997 and had resulted in my banding of 7167 nestling Great Horned Owls (Houston, 1978, 1987).

Turkey Vulture wing-tagging has mushroomed due to ever-increasing public interest. The highest occupancy of deserted buildings is in Aspen Parkland and in the Southern Mixed Forest across the entire 550 km breadth of central Saskatchewan.

Wing-tagging results: 87 active nests came under observation during 2009; 31 of these nests were new, the first year of wing-tagging at each. Two nests failed, with a single dead young; two nests failed with one and two unhatched eggs, respectively; two nests were too distant to reach in the time available, and are excluded from totals below. Sixty nests raised two young (but at five nests one young escaped without a wing-tag; and in another, a nestling hid beyond our reach; hence, we tagged only 114 nestlings); 18 nests raised only one young (one of these had an unhatched egg); 78 visited successful nests resulted in tagging of 114 + 18 = 132 tagged of a possible 138 young; three nests were reached too late (from each, two young flew without tags). Hence, 144 fledged from 81 successful nests under observation–1.78 young per successful nest or 1.69 per known nest.

Our obstacles are time and distance, coupled with the narrow 10- to 14-day window when nestling vultures have wings large enough to tag, yet are not at risk of flying away prematurely. Where the nestling has open access to the roof of the building, we have learned to go a week earlier, because of the increased propensity for such birds to escape before they can be tagged. Seven-year total: 479 nestling Turkey Vultures wing-tagged in 277 successful nests.

Wing-tag sightings: During 2009, 17 wing-tag sightings of vultures a year of age or older were reported to me, one each from 2003 and 2004, two from 2005, five from 2006, four from 2007, and four from 2008. When added to the previous 30 sightings of 24 vultures (Houston et al. 2009), this brings the project total to 47 sightings in 40 different "vulture-years."

In its seventh year (my 67th year of bird banding under permit 00460, the lowest private banding permit number in North America, in part because 557 of the first 929 banding permit numbers were issued to Canadians), this study has grown so large that a single crew can no longer reach every nest in time. Three newly trained taggers have applied for master banding permits for 2010, but all Saskatchewan Turkey Vulture Tagging will remain under one master permit.

Note: The Hawk Mountain arm of our vulture research also deserves special mention. Eight solar-powered satellite radio-transmitters or PTT's (Platform Transmitter Terminals) have been supplied to us by Keith Bildstein, the Sarkis Acopian Director of Conservation at the Acopian Center for Conservation Science, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Orwigsburg, PA. Furthermore, Dr. Marc Bechard, Professor of Biology at Boise State University, has made four special visits to Saskatchewan at his expense, to mentor and assist our team with the application of transmitters. Publications dealing with the transmitter-generated results of home ranges, winter ranges, and migration, are currently underway with Bildstein's assistance.

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C. Stuart Houston
863 University Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0J8
stuart.houston@usask.ca

Fall 2009 Report from Margery Adams Bird Banding Station (MABBS) — 394-0893 Springfield, IL

Bander/Coordinator: Vernon Kleen (08355)
Volunteers: Steve Coogan, Thad & Jan Edmonds, and Clark Olson

Although birds had been banded at the Illinois Audubon Society's Adams Wildlife Sanctuary (on the east side of Springfield, IL) during the falls of 1989 and 2008 and in the spring of 2009, the Margery Adams Bird Banding Station (MABBS) was not officially "formalized" until this fall (2009). The site is a 40-ac plot situated in and surrounded by a highly developed urban area. The banding habitat consisted of about 25 ac of regenerated woods (allowed to grow unchecked since the 1930s) and 4 - 5 ac of restored prairie. The remaining acres, not yet used for banding, were just converted (summer 2009) from sparse, scrubby second-growth to a wetland and more (anticipated) prairie habitat. The understory of the woods was heavily infested with winter creeper, bush honeysuckle, and other exotics that had "taken over." However, from a migratory bird's point of view, the sanctuary was a stopover haven after flying countless miles over treeless farmland and then limited habitat in city landscapes.

The 2009 migration-monitoring season at MABBS began on 31 Aug and concluded on 18 Nov. From 12 to 27 mist nets were used during 54 mornings (weekdays and Saturdays), producing a total of 5042 net hours of operation. Several days were lost to rain, including a six-day stretch from 14 - 19 Oct. This fall, 1599 birds of 72 species were banded; repeats and returns accounted for another 235 birds handled.

Banding was fairly slow through 14 Sep, with a maximum of 32 birds on the 7th; however, the average number of newly banded birds per day of operation during the last half of September was 34. Early October was also rather slow, averaging only 18 birds/day (through 13 Oct) followed (after the six-day rain-gap) by 13 birds/day (20 - 23 Oct). Then, from 24 - 31 Oct, the average jumped to 110 birds/day. The month of November (after an excellent conclusion to October) was a disappointment: only 147 birds banded in 12 days (average = 12/day). The seasonal high of birds banded in a single day was 138 (on 28 Oct). The greatest number of species caught on a single day was 23 (also on 28 Oct).

	2009	2008	1989
Species Banded	72*	69	72
Birds Banded	1599*	1281	2064
Banding Days	54	38	44
Total Net Hrs.	5042	3180	4246
Birds/Net Hr.	0.32	0.40	0.49
* Includes Hummingbirds.			