
the second oldest Red-tail ever recovered alive—the oldest was 28 years, 3 months.

To emphasize this bird's remarkable longevity, consider that as of 24 Jan 2011 there have been 195,359 Red-tailed Hawks banded in North America, but only 10,985, less than 5%, have ever been heard from again. Of these "encountered" birds, only about 1% (12 individuals) have lived 20 or more years. One was known to have lived 29 years, 9 months—a longevity record for the species. A second bird lived 28 years, 11 months. Both of these birds were recovered dead. Not only is the

bird in this account the second oldest Red-tail recovered alive, but the fourth oldest ever known in the wild.

Unfortunately, due to the severity of her injuries, this senior citizen Red-tailed Hawk cannot be released back into the wild. She has been awarded a permanent home at The Raptor Trust, where she has an important job of fostering young, orphaned Red-tails.

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Red -tailed hawk
Photo by R. Pantle

I Would Not Have Known if They Were Not Banded

Wait a minute; let me check that band number again. According to the database, I was the last one to capture this particular male and only two months ago at that. That did not seem right. Earlier that day, 10 Jun 2010, I was surveying Black-capped Vireos (*Vireo atricapillus*) in an area burned by a large wildfire back in early April. Black-capped Vireos prefer early successional habitats, but much of this area was just too early successional. However, the fire had been patchy and some areas did not burn

hot enough to kill all the trees and shrubs back to the ground and these had sprouted new leaves a few weeks after the fire. In one such area, I had spotted a pair of vireos and a flash of orange revealed that the male was color-banded. Fort Hood Military Reservation (Coryell and Bell Cos., TX), where I work, has hosted numerous researchers over the years, but I could not remember whether anyone had studied and banded vireos in the area of the burn. I followed the pair for about 15 min before I clearly saw all of the male's bands; dark green over orange on the left leg and white over silver on the right. I could hardly wait to get back to the office and look this one up in the database.

After retrieving information from the database and checking my field notebook, things became clear. This was the bird that had disappeared from my study area back in April. He had been the very first male to arrive on the site that year (2010) on 25 Mar. At the time, he was wearing only a silver band on his right leg. As part of a Black-capped Vireo monitoring program, my crew and I try to capture all the vireos in our intensive study areas to mark them individually with color bands. Because he had no color bands, it was clear that this male had been banded elsewhere. When I recaptured him, I found that he had been banded as age SY about a mile (1.6 km) to the southwest as part of another of our projects. This had happened five years earlier. His current age, 7Y, placed him among the oldest birds present on study areas that year.

I observed him on six days in late March in early April. He was moving around a restricted area like any male Black-capped Vireo that had established a territory. On three days I saw that he was accompanied by a female. On 4 Apr, I set out to see him again hoping to find the pair building a nest. Instead, I found the male battling another right in the middle of the territory. They were chasing and singing rapidly. Their movement through the bushes was so rapid that it was hard to get a clear view, but eventually I saw that the adversary had yellow over mauve on his left leg and black over silver on the right. This bird was age 5Y and had held the disputed area as his territory during the two previous breeding seasons.

The next time I visited the area, the 5Y bird was present and the 7Y bird was gone. I expected that he would set up territory adjacent to the 5Y, but I could not find him over the next several weeks. I began searching nearby areas just outside the boundary of the study area, but still with no success. Eventually, I gave up and figured I would never know what happened to him. It was largely by luck and serendipity that I was in the burn area a mile away to the northeast and saw a flash of orange on the male's leg.

Another case in which I would have had little idea what was happening if the birds had not been banded involved a female Black-capped Vireo. A graduate student had banded her in 2007 as part of research for her master's degree. In 2008, the bird relocated

about three-quarters of a mile (1.2 km) to my study site, where she paired with a banded male and later nested. Early in the nestling stage, the banded male disappeared and was replaced by a male without bands. The transition was so seamless that I had to do a double take when I first saw the unbanded male. The new mate helped feed the nestlings and accompanied the young after they fledged. One day, I spotted the female two territories away with one of the fledglings. This was not all that unusual; females with fledglings often wander indiscriminately among neighboring territories. What was unusual was that she stayed in the neighbor's territory. The neighbor male's second nest attempt of the season had recently failed and his female had apparently deserted him. When the new female arrived with a fledgling in tow, he merely accompanied them at first. If I got too close to the youngster, the female scolded. Later, the male also scolded if I got too close. Within a week, the female built a nest and began laying eggs while the male appeared to take over care of the fledgling completely. The new nesting attempt failed in the nestling stage and I did not see this female again for two years. In that year (2010), she was back in the vicinity of her successful 2008 nest. She stayed with the same male through two failed nesting attempts until succeeding on the third.

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Black-capped Vireo

Photo by Gilbert Eckrich