
NORTH AMERICAN BIRD-BANDER OPINION PIECE

Are “backyard banders” operations worthwhile?

Banding stations have historically included a wide spectrum of efforts from the lone backyard bander, using a few traps on the occasional weekend, on up to multi-thousand annual bandings at bird observatories. The question is, “can the smaller banding efforts really make a contribution to science and be justified?”

The justification for a banding permit for a large, question-driven or long-term monitoring station is pretty well established. How about the other end of the spectrum, the small, perhaps very seasonal operation? We at NABC have heard clearly, and agree that issuance of banding permits is and should be increasingly based on a good scientific justification, not just the recaptures of local birds. Most ornithologists would agree, in addition, that being part of a local, regional or national network of banding stations, would give you ample justification for your efforts: even a single location, even your backyard.

There are, of course, some such networks. Under the guiding hand of IBP (*birdpop.org*), we benefit from the breeding season MAPS program, and the mostly non-breeding Latin America MoSI program. Both are excellent models that will preserve your data very well and have produced very interesting analyses. There is also LaMNA (Landbird Monitoring Network of the Americas) which is a repository for all data, no matter your protocol. Other networks with strict protocols include the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network, and networks for hummingbirds, Purple Martins, Northern Saw-whet Owls, Tree Swallows, and bluebirds. However, some of these, as well as the Bird Banding Lab and Office, do not accept, curate, and archive the very important demographic, measurement, and physiological data that are part of most station operations.

If you want to use participation in a network as justification for a new or renewal of a permit, you might need to have it truly be a “Constant-Effort Station”. In MAPS, this required effort is very clear: you usually operate on a 10-day basis from May into August. In MoSI, it is a few times during the winter for a few days each. However, many people and stations operate with different schedules, such as throughout the year, daily, only during migration, or once a month. I feel strongly that they should still be able to contribute their data to a program. While an esteemed colleague recently wrote me that “I see this as the reverse... they should be part of a program and submit their data to that program. Ideally, the data should fit the program, not the program fit the data.” Indeed that is the ideal. Some excellent data has been and may continue to be lost unless some program can accommodate it.

In LaMNA, we do not require as large a degree of consistency, as we have found that even less restrictive protocols can really produce very interesting results, as the good data from your captures can overcome at least some of the effects of somewhat irregular effort. Examples appear regularly here in *North American Bird Bander*, such as studies of age and sex criteria. A strong example that Walter Sakai pointed out to me is that Pyle’s Part I and II would not exist were it not for these types of work.

This value is even truer as data are combined for analyses in larger, multi-station, data sets such as contained in papers in Ralph and Dunn (2004. Monitoring Bird Populations Using Mist Nets. *Studies in Avian Biology* 29). I would venture to say that you would have a higher probability of justifying a permit if banding is done on a regular basis (from daily, to weekly, to even monthly) and covers completely at least one or more seasons (e.g., fall migration) or even year around!

So, I would say that the answer to my question above is a resounding “yes”, provided that the small operation contribute the data from their “constant-effort” station’s effort to a network where the whole will become much more than the sum of the parts. I think that the permitting from the Bird Banding Lab or Office will reflect this reality. *For other ideas on how you can justify your efforts, take a look at the “Report of the Federal Advisory Committee on the Bird Banding Laboratory (<http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/circ1320/>)*

C. John Ralph
Arcata, California (c.ralph@humboldt.edu)

p.s. Thanks to Lesley Howes, Geoff Geupel, Linda Long, Carol P. Ralph, and Walter Sakai for very helpful comments.