

Bird Banding for Scientific Research

By Celeste Silling

When studying animals in the wild, researchers must often keep track of and identify individual animals. In ornithology, the study of birds, there's a simple solution: bird banding. Bird banding is an incredibly useful tool for bird researchers. It involves placing a plastic or metal band around the leg of a bird before rereleasing the animal back into the wild. The band has an individual number and letter combination that allows scientists to keep track of individuals, like a license plate or a social security number.

To start the process, researchers must catch the bird. Depending on the species, this can be done in a number of ways. For smaller birds like songbirds, they can use fine mesh nets called mist nets. Birds can't see the thin mesh and fly right into the net, falling gently into one of the hanging pockets. For larger birds or ones that don't fly as often, they can use box traps or simple hand nets. Of course, all of these methods require training in order to be done properly without harming the birds, so don't try this at home!

Next, the bird is quickly and carefully extracted from the trap or net and brought to the highly trained bander. The bander places a light aluminum metal band on the bird's leg. The band has to be the right size: not be too tight that it could hurt the bird, and not so loose that it will fall off. On its surface, the band has a nine-digit individual code. The banders write down the code, the date, weight, and other measurements for each bird, then release it. The whole process from catch to release only takes a few minutes.

All of the information about the bird is uploaded by the bander to the Bird Banding Laboratory's database. From then on, if the bird is ever caught again, the people who catch it can look up the band number on the BBL database and notify whoever banded it. This way, we can track birds over long amounts of time and vast distance.

In the United States, bird banding is regulated by the Bird Banding Laboratory, which is part of the United States Geological Survey. In order to become a certified bird-bander, you must show proof that you can safely handle birds, and have good reason to be doing this research.

At Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we have banded thousands of birds and love hearing about where they end up. For example, we banded hundreds of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds last fall and we eagerly wait to see if any of them will be caught by other banders. One male was banded by us on September 24, 2019 and the BBL reported back to us that it had been caught again on May 28, 2020. It had been caught Dobbs Ferry, New York, over 1,452 miles away!

If you want to watch us band birds, you can tune in to Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's Facebook Live bird banding on April 16 from 8-10 AM.

Without bird banding, we would be hard pressed to track individual birds. With it, researchers can learn about where they migrate, how they use their habitat, and how the populations are doing.