Put A Ring On It

By Hannah Glass

Banding is a method of scientific research conducted on birds. It became formally recognized in the early 20th century and has been used in some fashion for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. This practice entails safely capturing a bird and placing a unique band on its leg using a pair of banding pliers. So… can anyone do this? No! Kids, please do not try this at home!

The unique numbers on the bands help us keep track of individual birds over a long time and a great distance. Researchers across the globe use this technique to study many facets of a bird's life. Some of these can include reproductive success, social structure, life-span, population growth, dispersal, migration, and identification of an individual - to name a few.

To be able to participate in this type of research you must apply for and receive a federal banding permit issued by the United State Geological Survey (USGS) Bird Banding Lab (BBL). In order to become permitted, you need to have a significant amount of experience banding birds whether it be through volunteering or working for an organization that is already permitted, and you must have a research goal.

To band birds, researchers need appropriately-sized bands issued by the USGS BBL. Birds have different sized legs, so in order to make sure no band is too big or too small, each species has a band size that is known to fit. These bands are made of metal, typically aluminum, and each have a unique number on it. So, if researchers were to ever catch that bird again, they would know when, where, and who banded it and how old it was when it was banded.

At GCBO, the Wilson's Plovers also receive an alpha-numeric field readable band or color bands. That's a mouthful! This is a plastic band that has two digits on it – it can be numbers and/or letters that are able to be read in the field by using binoculars, spotting scopes, or cameras. convenience of these bands is that the bird does not ever need to be recaptured in order to know who it is. Researchers, and anyone else with some form of high-powered lens, can tell by the easily visible codes and color combos!

After each bird is banded, the bander has the responsibility of submitting their records to the USGS BBL database. This allows the lab to keep track of what band numbers have been used, as well as the data that was collected on each individual when it was banded. Lots of other data can be collected when banding such as age, sex, wing length, tail length, culmen, tarsus, and hallux. Many researchers currently study the different levels of leads and toxins in various bird species as well.

Since it can be hard to assess certain aspects of the lives of birds from visual observance only, banding has opened the door to explore new ways to study, and therefore help preserve and protect birds all over the world.

A great way that you can contribute to this research is by resighting banded birds. If you see a banded bird, snap a photo, or try to read the code or note the color combo. You can report it to the USGS BBL online. When the researchers there investigate your report, they will reach back out to you and inform you of that bird's history. This is one of my favorite parts of citizen science, and I try to do it whenever I can! So, next time you see a banded bird, ask yourself: "who put a ring on it?" and submit a report to the USGS BBL to find out!

Photo 4456: An adult female Wilson's Plover with an alpha-numeric field readable code: "C5" and a USGS aluminum band.

Photo 5832: A Wilson's Plover chick hatched from "C5" this year with a 5-color band combo and a USGS aluminum band.

Photos by Gulf Coast Bird Observatory