

ONTARIO BIRD BANDING ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



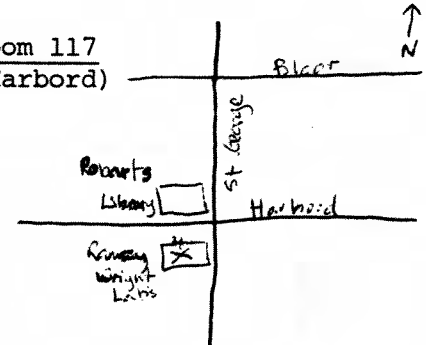
FEBRUARY 1983

Please send articles to:
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OBBA 1983 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Saturday, 5 March 1983

NEW LOCATION: Ramsey Wright Zoological Laboratories Room 117
25 Harbord St. (corner of St. George & Harbord)
University of Toronto
Toronto



Meeting Agenda

- 9:15 Registration (Fee \$2.00) and Coffee
- 9:45 Introduction of Members and Guests
- 9:50 President's Report
- 10:00 Treasurer's Report
- 10:05 Election of 1983 Executive Committee Members
- 10:10 Coffeebreak and viewing of displays
- 10:30 Aspects of Loon Breeding Biology on Recreational Lakeshores - Jan McDonnell

Station Reports

- 10:45 Toronto Bird Observatory
- 10:55 Guelph Banding Station
- 11:05 Prince Edward Point Observatory
- 11:15 Hawk Cliff Raptor Banding Station
- 11:25 Ottawa Bird Observatory
- 11:35 Long Point Bird Observatory
- 11:45 - 1:45 Break for lunch (location to be arranged)
Viewing of displays and tours of new ROM bird collection location

Invited Speakers

- 1:45 The Use of Colour-banding in a Study of Song Learning in Indigo Buntings - Robert B. Payne
- 2:45 Drawings for Door Prizes
- 3:10 Coffeebreak and Viewing of Displays
- 3:40 Aspects of the Breeding Biology of the American Redstart in southern New Brunswick - Mike Morris
- 4:00 Food Storage and Memory in Chickadees and Tits - David F. Sherry
- 4:20 Meeting Adjourned

An early evening get-together will be held at the Locke House (FON Headquarters). A buffet dinner and refreshments will be available. Additional details will be provided at the meeting.

DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITS WANTED

This year the OBBA Annual General Meeting will have a special exhibits room set up adjacent to the speakers room. It will feature a variety of displays and salesbooths of bird-related materials including books, artwork, records and banding equipment. Information on bird observatories and naturalist projects and a bird identification quiz will also be exhibited. The room will be open most of the day for those interested in browsing. If you have a display or know of one that could be exhibited, please contact Erica Dunn, 30 Davidson Dr., Aurora, Ont. L4G 2B1, phone (416) 727-3519.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE

The chairman of the OBBA Nominating Committee, Bruce Duncan is seeking nominations to the Executive Committee for the 1983 year. Elections of the officers and other members of the committee will take place at the Annual General Meeting on 5 March. Members with suggestions of candidates are requested to Contact Bruce before the meeting or as provided in the Constitution, "additional nominations may be made in writing by any two members of the Association at the Annual General Meeting". Bruce Duncan may be contacted at P.O. Box 512, Caledonia, Ont. NOA 1A0.

RESPONSE AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON BANDING ETIQUETTE -- Erica Nol, Editor

In response to the notice in the last newsletter (November 1982), Stuart Houston, of Saskatchewan, brought to my attention an article he had published previously in The Ring and the Inland Bird Banding News. I reprint it here in its entirety for the benefit of those OBBA members like myself who missed it the first and second time around. It contains substantial food for thought for any that band.

In addition Chip Weseloh has written an article on the merits and pitfalls of banding young Ring-billed Gulls. Anyone who has entered a gull colony during the pre-fledgling period and wondered about the 'observer effect' should be interested in Chip's comments. I thank both authors for their contributions.

Mortality in Ringing - A Personal Viewpoint -- C. Stuart Houston

A cynic once defined an expert as "a person who has already made every conceivable mistake in his field". Much as I hate to admit it, in my thirty-two years of ringing, totalling over 61 000 birds of 193 species, I have become something of an expert. Like many others, I have learned the hard way. Since it is preferable to learn from the mistakes of others, before repeating them oneself, it might be useful to share some of my experiences.

Generally speaking, ringing mortality has received less attention than it deserves. Since mortality, morbidity and complication rates are common subjects in the medical literature with which I am most familiar, an occasional comparison with the investigation and treatment of human disease may help illuminate the problem in birds.

I wish to make two preliminary points. First, mortality is susceptible to statistical analysis and like many other aspects of ringing, deserves the increasing attention of scientific methodology. Second, the problem must be viewed against the background of changing public attitudes to wildlife.

A major change in public philosophy has occurred gradually over many years on the North American continent. Birdwatching has become an increasingly popular and almost respectable hobby, with more binoculars, more field guides and more cameras in evidence each year. In Saskatchewan, a recent statistical sampling by questionnaire of every 184th adult, though hampered by a response rate of only 20%, suggested that "observing birds forms a significant part of the outdoor recreational activities of almost 55 percent of adult Saskatchewanians". Though only 4.5% actually studied birds (defined as an activity during which the participants count, identify, band, collect specimens, etc. and/or keep written, photographic or taped records of observations), such percentages still seem high compared to only 8% of urban residents and 14% of rural residents who hunted birds in the fall of 1973. Such figures indicate a pronounced change from the days of early settlement 60 to 90 years ago, when the majority of adult males shot ducks and grouse for food, and birdwatchers were a laughing-at minority.

Non-hunters now are in the majority and an increasingly vocal number demand an end to all hunting. (As a one-time hunter myself, with a father and son who are still enthusiastic hunters, I must disassociate myself from this new viewpoint. At least in our sparsely populated province, sportsmen's groups have accomplished more in conservation of habitat than have naturalists' groups; our overall wildlife picture would suffer rather than gain from cessation of hunting).

Not only is the hunter subjected to closer scrutiny - but so is the naturalist. The collecting of specimens, until recently the only way to place a new species on a province or state list, is increasingly frowned upon. And as more people are opposed to shooting birds, whether for sport or science, there is now a small but increasing group of birdwatchers who are even hostile to ringing activities. They have an idealistic, romantic view of birds as untrammelled spirits and do not wish to have them touched.

One must admit that bird ringing always carries a potential mortality. Usually this is small indeed. (One might compare this to the risk inherent in most medical procedures, for example the 1 in 60 000 chance of death during an x-ray examination of human kidneys). The risk may seem non-existent as hundreds or thousands of birds are handled without incident. Yet sooner or later there will be a death. A trap lid will fall on the neck of redpoll, a fledgling mallard while held will "die of fright", or a chickadee will become hopelessly entangled in a mistnet, wringing its own neck. I have experienced each of these more than once - and each time I am filled with remorse.

Nevertheless, most ringing operations are justifiable. They should have an expectation of benefit - some increment of knowledge should be anticipated. Knowledge of the origin, movements, causes of mortality and average longevity are essential facts for management of any species, and ringing is often an excellent, if not the best, method of obtaining such information. There should be a positive benefit: risk ratio.

With birds, however, the benefit accrues to the population, not to the individual and, therefore, the discussion must concern populations, not individuals. Successful species produce large enough clutches to compensate for high natural mortality. Certainly in the smaller species, where each individual has a short life span, the survival or otherwise of a single individual has no effect whatever on the local population. Over half the young robins must die, or we would soon have too many robins.

A ringer should view any one individual bird realistically and unsentimentally as a surplus, a part of the year's crop of that species. Many game species can sustain a 20% annual harvest and still increase in numbers if habitat is favorable. By this token we should not be sorry if 10% of the Short-eared Owls are killed by road traffic, or 2% of the Bohemian Waxwings meet their demise by flying into picture windows of modern homes, or if 1% of a flock of warblers have a fatal collision with a television tower. On this basis, we can hardly complain if one of every million of the continent's Black-pollled Warblers should happen by accident to die in a mistnet. The unit of study is the population, not the individual, and hopefully the study has potential benefit for the population.

We must also consider the possible benefit of such studies to the human race. The fun and enjoyment of banding, at times a fine field sport in every sense, helps compensate for the time and expense of the hobby, but is not itself a justification. The advance of knowledge in general, and of particulars such^{as} human disease vector transmission, may justify some studies.

On the other hand, bird fatalities from human carelessness cannot be defended. Those due to human ignorance and inexperience should be combatted with the necessary information and education. I would like to offer the following tentative criteria:

1. RINGING MUST NOT HARM THE LOCAL POPULATION. Hence ringing is avoided in very rare or vulnerable species: if ringing were to cause desertion at a single Osprey nest in Scotland, that would be an inexcusable calamity. Many years ago, banders in North America noted an excessive mortality among songbird young banded in open, unprotected nests, chiefly because predators were attracted to these nests; this method has been largely abandoned for this reason.

2. AVERAGE OR ACCEPTABLE MORTALITY RATES FOR THAT RINGING METHOD SHOULD NOT BE EXCEEDED. There is an obvious need to compile such figures. (Such rates are compiled for each surgical operation, though there is a tendency for published results to be those of the best surgeons in the best hospitals; the average risk for any particular operation is thus usually greater than the literature might suggest).

The corollary might then be that all banders should submit mortality figures with their annual reports. This might have a salutary effect, providing that everyone reported honestly. Some ringers would learn that their figures were too high and would be encouraged to improve their methods - or terminate their projects. As with human rates, such as infant mortality rates, the mere calculation of an unexpectedly high rate should lead to necessary investigation, publication of new methods, possible solutions and eventual improvement.

3. IF THE MORTALITY RATE IS HIGHER THAN THE RECOVERY RATE, THE MORTALITY RATE IS TOO HIGH. I offer this as "Houston's rule". To phrase it differently, any ringing procedure that offers a greater statistical chance of killing the bird, than it does of learning something of the movement or longevity of that bird, is in my opinion unconscionable.

In the example of mistnetting North American warblers, where the recovery rate is one per thousand or less, a particular banding station with a mortality of one per hundred, by this rule needs to do some serious soul-searching. Perhaps more manpower, more constant surveillance of the nets, or a different type of net, might be the answer. Perhaps such a project should be discontinued.

Admittedly, as in human medicine, artificial rules and criteria in the long run are less important than the individual's knowledge and experience, and more particularly his judgement and integrity. And, as in human medicine, everyone will make some mistakes - but hopefully they make each mistake only once. And by studying the mistakes of others, they can avoid making many mistakes.

With any new procedure, errors will inevitably be made in the early stages. It will be obvious that circumstances vary greatly, between localities and between ringers. The first need is careful study of the needs and vulnerabilities of each species in each region.

It might now be appropriate for me to share with you some of the mistakes I have made and seen, concerning the special examples of hawks and colonial birds.

HAWKS: Buteos generally and Swainson's Hawks particularly, will usually desert their nest if disturbed once during the egg season - and sometimes even if the disturbance is as late as the first week after hatching. Very early in my ringing career, I climbed two Swainson's Hawk nests when eggs were present - both pairs deserted and produced no young for me to ring. I learned to visit Swainson's nests only after 1 July and ideally not before mid-July. A farm lad proudly reported to me one May that he had five Swainson's Hawk nests, supposing that I would wish to ring the young later. He had climbed each tree and counted the eggs, meaning well, but unaware of the possible danger of this visit to the birds he loved. Even worse than my discouraging prediction, all five pairs promptly deserted - and there were no young to ring in his area that year. Nestfinding of such birds must be done from a distance.

COLONIAL BIRDS: When I began visits to these very specialized groups that nest so close to one another, I was worried whether the disturbance of such visits was harmful, for I noticed an occasional young gull being pecked to death upon entering territory of another pair. For a few years, I made repeat visits just after fledging time, and found to my relief that there were no more dead birds than at other colonies where no ringing had been done. Yet there were three unhappy episodes to report in twenty years.

Once, after travelling over 250 miles on poor gravel roads to Dore Lake, we got up before dawn only to find it was pouring rain. Thinking our opportunity was lost, we returned to sleep. On awakening at 0600 hours, it was no longer raining and we felt the overcast skies would be sufficient protection from the hot sun that excludes mid-day visits. We were at the island from 1000 to 1300 hours, spending over half this time ringing 426 Double-crested Cormorants. Two weeks later, a return visit found 70 dead young cormorants, all of whom seemed to have perished within a few days of the visit. Perhaps the "Skyshine", even in the absence of direct sunlight, caused their death.

Another time, we ringed 942 Ring-billed Gulls on a windy day, at a colony on an island in Last Mountain Lake, that could be reached by wading for 100 m through water 1 m deep. The wind blew spray onto the young gulls who were half grown. A repeat visit in September disclosed 137 dead young that had failed to leave the island: probably they died from exposure.

Finally, at a colony of 300 young cormorants on Last Mountain Lake, we ringed 200 young within an hour, leaving the remainder unbanded - but found to our dismay that the largest birds from one area had in their panic tramped over and asphyxiated the smaller young in an adjacent group of nests, killing about twenty of them.

Rather than simply summarise the negative advice of avoiding mid-day, avoiding windy days and avoiding stampeding of the larger birds over smaller ones, it might be more helpful to outline the preparation for a specific visit to a Saskatchewan island colony. We go early in the morning. In the case of the Redberry Lake colony, sixty miles from Saskatoon, we rise at 0200 hours, leave the city before 0300 hours and launch our boat on the lake soon after 0400 hours. The barometer and weather forecasts are watched carefully the day before, and the trip is postponed if rain or high winds threaten. The last days of June or the first week of July are chosen, so that the young are advanced in development and there are few nests with eggs or unfeathered young. As a guideline, one hour is about all the time one should spend at one place.

One needs a crew of at least four people and they must keep fairly close together. If gulls are the only species, one can move along an island, ringing those young that hide in good cover on or near their territories. Adult gulls will settle back and rearrange their young within a few minutes after one has passed. However, cormorants and pelicans rarely return to their young until one has left the island, so after an hour ringing these species, one must leave the adjacent gulls unringed. However, if there is a hill between the gulls and the pelicans, as at one island, we could ring the gulls first without disturbing the others, and then move on to spend an hour ringing pelicans and cormorants. Pelicans and cormorants need one or two people to herd them, to keep them from water, keep the larger young from trampling the smaller ones, and to keep the ringed birds separated from those not yet ringed. Morning banding allows the parent birds to gather and settle their young under cover, before the heat of the midday sun.

We must keep this problem in perspective. Ringers' intervention must be compared to photographers' intervention, where the risk is often greater and the benefit may be only to the photographer, not the bird population. Ringers' intervention must also be compared to the serious ornithologists' intervention, where multiple visits to make entries for nest record card schemes may do more harm than a single, quick, well-timed visit by a ringer. One summer while a student, I was employed by Ducks Unlimited to make a study of duck nesting success. Although careful, I know my study led predators to the duck nests, resulting in an apparent nest failure rate greater than the apparent duck production on the area would suggest. And the same idealists who hate to see a bird compromised by wearing a ring, may be the nosy ones who look for bird nests and do their harm, without any compensating benefit of information recorded. We cannot yet quantitate these risks, but they are real.

In conclusion, we should all begin collecting data concerning the benefit: risk ratios in each aspect of bird ringing. The time is ripe.

To Band or Not To Band: What Do You Do With Pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls?*

- D.V. Chip Weseloh

Among banders, birders, ornithologists and naturalists this question has brought almost every imaginable response and reaction. The fundamental question always seems to be, Does the value derived from banding pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls outweigh the harm done (to the individual gulls and the population) by going into a colony and applying the band? As a bander, a birder, an ornithologist, a naturalist and as one who has worked with colonially nesting fish-eating waterbirds for 16 years, I have been asked to give my thoughts on that question.

Before I can attempt to answer this question, however, we must acknowledge what values are derived and what harm is caused by banding pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls. The values derived and harm caused may vary with every banding trip.

There are probably fewer scenarios to describe the type of harm that could be caused than there are to describe the values that may be derived. Therefore, let us deal with that aspect first. What happens when you go into a colony of Ring-billed Gulls that contain young of a bandable age? First, the adults in your immediate vicinity will jump into the air and circle around you, the intruder. This takes them away from their nests where they would have been feeding, brooding and/or guarding their young. Secondly, the young usually will flee from you by running. The number of young which flee and the distance to which they go will depend upon the commotion you make, the amount of vegetation or potential hiding areas on the colony and other more subtle factors. Generally, the more commotion you make, the farther the birds will run. However, gull chicks do not seem to flee as far in heavy vegetation as they do in sparse vegetation (or at least the bander is not as aware of it). As a bander, you band those chicks that don't run far and/or those that become trapped or caught by natural or artificial barriers, i.e., those that hide by a log, oil drum, bush or fence. When you leave the area, either for good or to go to another portion of the colony, the adults return almost immediately to their territories. The young will come out from hiding and, generally, attempt to return to their parents' territory, too. However, in making this return trek, they must pass through the territories of other adults where they will almost certainly be attacked by the territory holders. Depending on how old and strong the young are, depending on how many territories they must pass through and how many times they are attacked, few or many of them will be killed by the adults. This is mortality for which you, the bander, are directly responsible (though under natural conditions young which wander from their parents' territory are also attacked and often killed)! As you can well see, the larger the banding crew or the greater your wanderings through the colony or the longer you spend on the colony, the greater will be the number of young effected.

Another form of harm may occur at nests which contain only eggs or non-mobile young. When you force the adults to flee from these types of nests, the opportunity is there for other Ring-billed Gulls, or Herring Gulls, to quickly fly in, grab a chick or egg and fly off before the nest owners can have any recourse. This type of predation also occurs naturally but, as with mobile chicks, when you go into a colony to band, you increase its frequency. In summary then, by entering into a

*The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

Ring-billed Gull colony, a bander will; 1) cause young gulls to be displaced from their territories, attacked and often killed and 2) cause eggs and non-mobile gull chicks to be exposed to predation by neighbouring gulls. I think it is safe to say that mortality caused in this manner, at present, has no adverse effect upon the population of Ring-billed Gulls in Ontario. Of course, to the individual gull which is attacked, that is of little consolation!

Now let us look at the other side of the ledger; What value is derived from banding young Ring-billed Gulls, from making your foray into the gull colony and causing this additional mortality? As I see it, the values that can be derived from banding young Ring-billed Gulls fall into three categories: 1) scientific value, 2) educational value and 3) aesthetic or personal edification value. Of these, banding for "scientific value" is usually considered the most respectable, esteemed and legitimate. Without commenting on the widespread abuse or the euphemistic nature of that phrase, let me just say that depending upon the objective(s) of the individual study, there may or may not be any valid immediate scientific value in banding Ring-billed Gull chicks. For example, banding Ring-billed chicks to determine their annual migration is, in my opinion, almost senseless. The migratory aspect of their life cycle on the Great Lakes is already well known and there are thousands of recoveries waiting for further re-examination. In the same breath, however, I must reiterate that here we are talking about Ring-billed Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls only! For other species, which have not been banded or recovered in as large numbers as Ring-bills, much of their migration has yet to be worked out. What I am saying is that, if you are prone to justify banding Ring-billed Gull chicks on the basis of scientific value, then please carefully scrutinize this justification (and be honest with yourself). Is the real value scientific or is it something else (see below)?.

On a very practical level, great educational value can be derived from banding young Ring-billed Gulls if you use the experience to teach people how to band birds. As a species, the Ring-billed Gull is perhaps better suited for this than most. It is abundant and not endangered, it is easy to capture, not easily injured (by the bander) and its colonies are often quite accessible by boat or even by foot.

The final value that I wish to acknowledge is what I call the esthetic or personal edification value, though it could probably also be referred to as the personal education value. This is a value which, I believe, is not often fully admitted or fully recognized. This lack of admission and lack of recognition may be cause and effect, i.e., it is not admitted because it is not recognized. Yet it is a value to which, I believe, all banders cater, even (perhaps especially) when contemplating banding young Ring-billed Gulls. Many banders, perhaps most (perhaps all to some extent!), do not have the time, the desire and sometimes, the know-how or even the intention to compile or analyze fully the volume of data that result from the recovery of (their) banded birds. Therefore, if these banders are not banding for primarily scientific value and if there is no educational or instructional value on a given banding trip, then why do so many people band young Ring-billed Gulls? I believe they band young Ring-billed Gulls for the aesthetic, personal edification and/or personal education value. I believe the reward or value comes from handling and being physically close to the birds and their environs; from getting onto the colony, legitimately, and seeing "how the birds are doing", from knowing first hand the strength and sharpness of a gull's bill, the fragility of its wings and legs or simply being mesmerized by the raucous calls of hundreds of adults milling overhead as you band their young.

Unfortunately, as I stated above, this value is often not recognized as a valid reason for banding birds and I'm not saying that it, alone, should be. However, I feel it is a defensible value, and an important factor in developing and maintaining one's ornithological conscience and awareness. However, the development of such awareness is more complex and needs more discussion than I can give it here.

To answer, then, the question posed in the first paragraph of this discourse, I would say that with the proper guidelines (outlined below), the value(s) derived from banding pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls do outweigh the harm done in applying the band. However, this may not be the case for most other species. For, remember, that Ring-billed Gulls often nest in conjunction with other species of fish-eating birds. If any other such species are present and may be disturbed by your activities, you must re-evaluate the harm that could be done to all species by your banding activities.

One final footnote should be added on the value derived from banding. Regardless of the value(s) under which you band young Ring-billed Gulls, there will always be a "potential scientific value" in having done it. One of the best examples of this which I know is the study done to determine the origin of Ring-billed Gulls which colonized the Leslie Street Spit in Toronto. The investigator (Dr. Hans Blokpoel) did little banding himself, but by reading band numbers on hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls banded by others, regardless of whether originally for scientific, educational or aesthetic value, he was able to derive considerable information on the origins of the gulls which nested at the Leslie Street Spit.

Guidelines for Banding Pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls

These should be obvious to anyone who has a little common sense and the welfare of the young birds at heart. The ideal situation for banding pre-fledged Ring-billed Gulls might be to band with a minimum of chasing about the colony, with a crew of up to three or four banders during the early morning or late afternoon hours of a clear day and remain on the colony no more than one to two hours. In other words, do not madly chase the young about the colony or band with a large crew of people (more than four), do not band when it is raining or during the heat of the day (approximately 1100-1600 hrs) and do not remain on the colony more than two hours.

MEETINGS AND EVENTS

TORONTO BIRD OBSERVATORY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 15 March 1983 at 7:30pm in the Ramsey Wright Zoological Laboratories, 25 Harbord St., Toronto. Various talks and activities are planned as well as a short business session. Phone George Fairfield (485-9083) for more information.

The Toronto Bird Observatory is holding a workshop on Sunday 10 April, to design and build potter traps for use at Mugg's Island during the 1983 banding season. Those interested in providing expertise, and assistance please contact Don Pope, 238 Finch W., Willowdale, Ont. (416) 222-8919.

Mike Cadman of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas has requested the Toronto Bird Observatory to do the atlas work on Walpole Island; an extensive marshy area near Wallaceburg Ontario. Those interested in assisting in this two day work should contact: David Broughton, 4 Heddington, Toronto (416) 489-7444. Tentative dates for the trip
18 10 June 1983