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The revolution from Observatory to Network .. and “where have all the data gone?”

Many of us involved with banding have been associated one way or another with a “Bird Observatory”. What I term “Bird Observatories” have several things in common; they typically include monitoring, education, and research (often all three). At almost all the Bird Observatories in the Americas, the underlying theme has always been ***Long-term Bird Monitoring Science***, with counts of various kinds, and banding usually at the core. In the Americas, Bird Observatories have been a positive force for 80 years, and I calculate they have generated a data universe of about 30 million landbird banding records. Congratulations!

What is distinctive about a Bird Observatory is “one stop shopping” for science-based information and expertise about birds. Among the several hundred Observatories in the Americas are a staggering panoply of governance models, financial states (from budgets of a few thousand a year to several millions!), personnel (up to a couple of hundred), and appellation (think of Bird Studies Canada, Manomet Center for Conservation Science, and Powdermill Avian Research Center).

In WBBA-land, we are justifiably proud of the role the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (currently “rebranded” as PRBO Conservation Science) has played in bird research and conservation over the past 45 years. Its direct descendents include many other entities in the Americas, including the Institute for Bird Populations, Klamath Bird Observatory, the several Costa Rica Bird Observatories, and many others.

When WBBA started PRBO in 1965, we followed a hallowed tradition, going back to the very first ‘modern’ Bird Observatory, founded in 1910 on the German island of Helgoland: to have a single station. At PRBO, the focus was on banding using volunteers who were motivated by the idea that they could make marked contributions to science! And in retrospect, equally important were evenings around the kitchen table where lifelong friendships formed amongst teachers, handymen, housewives, students, vagabonds, seekers-of-knowledge, and researchers alike with birds as the social and scientific nexus.

In the first decade of PRBO, there were some things we did not do, and probably should have. We had, for example, neither clocks nor seasons for nets: that is, we often ran nets around the year, all day and night, or skipped several days. In other words, our netting effort was anything but standardized. We also did not do any other surveys as a compliment to banding, as compared to today’s Observatories that often do “area searches” or “checklists” while banding. In that pre-computer era, we also could not enter the data, and thus our efforts at analysis were laborious, yet led inexorably to intimate knowledge of each bird.

Today, single-station Observatories, together with sophisticated data management and high speed internet, are enthusiastically joining into powerful data networks, following the model of the peerless Chan Robbins’ “Operation Recovery.” These

networks have many millions of accessible data records through herculean efforts such as MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) and LaMNA (Landbird Monitoring Network of the Americas).

While these data networks link Observatories and provide opportunities to examine patterns at scales greater than single locations, they would benefit greatly from inclusion of sizeable datasets that have not yet been entered. For example, I recently discovered through our data-archiving efforts at LaMNA, about 100,000 unentered landbird banding records from nets and traps at the Austin Ornithological Research Station near Wellfleet on Cape Cod between 1930 and 1957. Entering them

now is a lot cheaper than paying for a time machine to go back and sample the birds again!

Such “heritage” data sets are potential treasure troves of information, extending our knowledge back in time and providing a baseline analog for today’s rapidly changing world. These data need to be sought out, entered, and archived for future generations and scientific endeavors into this newish century. If you know of any such hidden treasures, please let us know.

C. John Ralph, WBBA President
Arcata, California (cjralph@humboldt1.com)

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