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Recovering from recoveries: bird banding soon to be obsolete?

In a beautifully written piece in the March-April 2012 *Audubon Magazine*, Scott Weidensaul* told of the fantastic insights into bird migration coming as a direct result of new transmitter and data logger technologies. Recent advances in device technology and data visualization are giving researchers and the public the ability to track individual birds throughout the year.

On an off-key note in the article, Scott quotes Steve Kress, the well-known puffin expert and Audubon scientist, stating that the new technologies "could be far more important than bird bands, and future ornithologists may someday think of placing metal rings on bird legs as being as primitive as we might

think of John James Audubon's method of tying a silver thread to a phoebe leg."

Although I would defend his right to hyperbole and setting up a "band-recovery" straw man, these are unfortunate turns of phrases. As we are all aware, banding is under increasing scrutiny, and that recoveries have become a very small part of why we band landbirds. In a follow-up note that I sent to Scott he replied: "I think we're on a technological trajectory that will someday bring a time when we can track - inexpensively, with precision and in real time - every bird we mark, at which point Steve's prediction will come true. When that happens, using leg bands and playing a recovery lottery probably

will seem like a quaint, random, inefficient way to study birds". This is a wonderful and mind-expanding method (see Sechrist et al. 2012, elsewhere in this issue), but only part of the picture. Scott does mention the other uses of the data in his note to me, and said "we will still have to capture large numbers of birds for all the other reasons".

Of course, some folks equate banding only with far-flung recoveries and many otherwise knowledgeable birders will first ask you about "where have your birds been found?" To meet this perception, we all should be continually outlining the other and varied reasons we band birds, our collaborations to publish our results, and talking about the insights into bird behavior and conservation from the "Constant Effort Mist-netting" that hopefully most of us participate in. At bird observatories and MAPS stations, or by participating in LaMNA (Landbird Monitoring Network of the Americas) *and* taking full data on every bird captured, we can now see the wonderful results of the new software and hardware of the past decade that are giving us unprecedented insights into bird ecology. Now almost commonplace are the new statistical tools that can look simultaneously at many variables taken irregularly in time and space. We can see the underlying signals of bird biology coming strong and clear through the noise.

As Leo Salas at PRBO commented to me, these statistical tools are just the magnifying glass to see the patterns in the data. The tools will be available to look at any data regardless of provenance. He feels that the great danger in loading birds with technology is that we would be putting blinders on ourselves, as we would only be able to see what information the tag collects or what information we ask the tags to collect. Banding data are more complex than location and micro-climate data (or any other parameters a tag can possibly collect).

As tracking technology evolves, we will still need to trap and mark birds to apply the devices, recording in-hand data on physiology, molt, sex and age and building on the continually improving methodology for management, analysis and interpretation of the

resulting data. Given the need to build on existing long-term data sets, new technologies will necessarily augment, but certainly not begin to replace, current banding methods and technologies.

Recoveries from waterfowl are of course an important part of the federal funding engine that drives the Bird Banding Office in Canada, and the BBL in the U.S. However, WBBA is quite united in increasing the commitment of the BBL to permitting migration monitoring and other constant-effort stations. We need to align our outreach message so that the birding public, popular writers, agency bureaucrats, and everybody in between, understands what knowledge we currently gain, what the future will hold, and the vital importance of continuing to expand bird monitoring through banding operations in the Americas.

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*Scott Weidensaul "Unlocking Migration's Secrets" *Audubon Magazine*. March-April 2012. (<http://www.audubonmagazine.org/articles/birds/unlocking-migrations-secrets>)

