

Bird Banding

Its Changing Role in Illinois and the Nation

By Christine Philip

One of the almost mythical figures of Chicagoland birding, Alfred H. Reuss, Jr. often tells the story of how he and his friend, the late Karl E. Bartel, set up their banding nets in Oak Hill Cemetery in Blue Island and caught 100,000 birds between 1934 and 1940. Reuss said he would watch as Bartel climbed the water tower in the cemetery and banded nestling Barn Owls. Between them, Reuss and Bartel banded at least 1 million birds in the Blue Island area alone. Bartel had attained his 60th year of bird banding before his death last year; Reuss reached his 60th anniversary in April.

Bird banding as Reuss and Bartel knew it is quickly changing. Soon the so-called backyard or recreational bird banders will be completely replaced by scientists pursuing specific research questions that can only be answered by tracking the movements of banded birds. Within five years, the only new federal permits likely to be issued by the Office of Migratory Bird Management in Laurel, Maryland, will be to field biologists at approximately 100 stations nationwide, each participating in tightly organized and standardized banding research.

Nearly 200 years ago, John James Audubon became perhaps the first of many similarly curious North American bird watchers who set up traps and nets to catch birds, mark them for future identification, and release them back into the wild. Early in his career, Audubon wondered if the Eastern Phoebe nesting along a

creek at his home, Mill Grove, near Philadelphia would return to the same site next year. To find out, he tied silver thread around the legs of the nestling phoebes. Researchers speculate that Audubon may have had a band recovery from the phoebe brood, but what conclusions he drew from his data and how he used the information remains unclear.

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More recent banders include Frances Hamerstrom who became interested in birds by observing the chickadees in her garden. When Hamerstrom found she could not keep the identically patterned chickadees straight in their frequent comings and goings to her feeding station, she devised a way to catch the birds and tie different colored threads to their wings. The chickadees were exceedingly adept at removing knotted threads, so Hamerstrom began experimenting with colored leg bands.

For years, many Illinois bird banders such as Reuss and Bartel

worked independently, setting up nets at locations of their choice, after being trained and securing a banding permit from the migratory bird office. They are often called "recreational" banders because they are not part of a specific scientific research project. The majority are dedicated, careful volunteer observers who contribute valid data to the body of knowledge being amassed. But they often do not publish results of their efforts in scientific journals or work to answer specific research questions. Most exclusively band non-game birds only during migration. They do not always follow the aging, sexing, and measurement guidelines set out by the migratory bird office.

The most extreme of these recreational banders are the "bird golfers," who set up their nets opportunistically, choosing locations they think might "up their score" and increase the number of species (hopefully rare species) they can add to their banded bird list. Their data is perhaps the least valuable of any banders because they are not tracking the movement of birds in a single, selected location for a specific time period.

The more careful recreational birders such as Reuss faithfully copy their data and send it in hard copy to the Maryland permitting office. But, said Reuss, "The permitting process is getting tighter and tighter. It's much harder for new banders to get a permit." Reuss was not happy when the migratory bird management office informed him that within five years