

BIRD BANDING IN WINTER

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The springtime, with its increasing tempo of birdlife and the thousands of migrating songbirds, would seem to be the most profitable season for the birdbander. Or, perhaps, the fall migration when the fields and marshes are filled with both young and adult songsters. While this is true to some extent it is also possible to carry on very successful banding operations during the cold and snowy winter months.

While this paper is not intended to be a mere recital of statistics, it is necessary to include a few numerical data for comparison. As a basis for study our banding records for the three months, December, January and February were selected. This record extends from December 1930 to and including February 1950. While the month of March is often just as cold and wintry it is omitted because of spring migration movements. During our eleven years of banding we have banded about 12,000 birds. Of this number less than 10% or roughly 1,000 birds were banded as nestlings. This leaves 11,000 birds that were trapped. Our records show that we trapped and banded 403 birds during the month of December, 668 during January and 1,009 during February. The total is 2,080 or nearly 18% of all our banding is done during the winter.

While the number of different species which are available in winter is considerably smaller than during the spring or fall, we have been able to capture 25 different species. These are: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Marsh Hawk, Sparrow Hawk, Herring Gull, Mourning Dove, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Prairie Horned Lark, Bluejay, Crow, Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Shrike, Starling, Mourning Warbler, Cardinal, Evening Grosbeak, Redpoll, Pine Siskin, Slate Colored Junco, Tree Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Song Sparrow, and Snow Bunting. (Editor's note — And recently a Dickcissel.)

The main advantage of banding in winter is the presence of the snow. During the late fall when the ground is bare and plenty of waste grains and weed seeds are available to the birds it is more difficult to trap them. When the snow covers most of this food they will readily enter traps baited with either grain or weed seed. Suet, peanut butter, raw peanuts, sunflower seeds, and nut meats of all kinds are also attractive to many of the winter birds. Well established feeding stations are also a boon to banders. Many people have winter feeding stations at their homes and are usually glad to have a bander bring a few small traps to catch and band their collection of winter visitors.

The most common bird at our banding area in the winter is the Tree Sparrow. These cheery red-capped sparrows usually appear late in October and remain until late April or early May. They enter traps readily and sometimes acquire the trap habit. A bird with the trap habit is one that spends most of his time inside one of the traps "sponging" his living from the trapper. It is not uncommon to remove the same bird from one or another of the traps six or eight times in one day. Although we never have had a foreign recovery from any of our Tree Sparrows, a number of them return to our traps winter after winter. One individual came back to us every year for five consecutive years.

It has been definitely established through banding that the same indi-

vidual birds return year after year to the same locality to build their nests and rear their young. A study of our return records of Tree Sparrows suggests that there also is a definite trend for the individual birds to spend their winter seasons in the same area each year.

We possess a large wire trap roughly four feet long, three feet wide and one foot high. In one side are two funnel shaped entrances about six inches square. A little grain or weed seed bait spread on the ground inside the trap will entice ground feeding birds in through the openings and they very seldom can find their way out. For several winter seasons we have used this trap in our garden to trap Tree Sparrows. On December 31, 1939 we banded a Tree Sparrow with band number 40-78206. This bird spent the rest of the winter with us and spent a good share of his time in one or another of our traps. The last time we caught him that spring was April 16, 1940. He returned to us on November 28, 1940 and remained with us until April 8, 1941. The records show that he was trapped and released exactly 101 times that winter season. Tree Sparrows were unusually scarce the fall of 1941 and we caught very few during October and November. We had the large trap set and baited but number 40-78206 did not show up. During the night of December eleventh snow fell and in the morning there was about two inches or so on the ground. When I went outside to clear the snow from the traps and spread fresh food I found one Tree Sparrow already captured in the large trap. It proved to be our old friend number 40-78206. With the snow completely covering all of the bait in the trap, why did he enter? It must have been some other reason than the attraction of food. Could he perhaps have remembered from the previous year where he could get a good meal?

Most banders trap very few birds of prey. During the winter some of the hawks often frequent the trapping area in hopes of picking up an easy meal. By using a live English Sparrow or two placed in a small wire cage which in turn is set in the bottom of a large top opening trap we have been able to trap and band several hawks. After they are banded we usually transport them several miles away to prevent their becoming a nuisance.

In addition to the common winter residents we are sometimes able to band some of the more unusual visitors from the north. One year several Red-breasted Nuthatches spent the winter with us and we banded three of them. Another year it was the Redpolls and Pine Siskins but this year it has been the Evening Grosbeaks. They spent the winter in unusually large numbers in the Finger Lakes area this season. As most of you probably know they will gorge themselves with sunflower seeds if they can get them. They also trap fairly easily but a little care must be exercised when handling them, not so much for the safety of the bird, as for the safety of one's fingers. A good peck with their strong beaks can draw blood in short order. One of the members of our club who has been buying sunflower seeds at about fifty cents a pound to feed thirty or forty hungry Grosbeaks made the remark that he never dreamed that he would some day have to drive Evening Grosbeaks away from his feeding station to let the other birds have a chance at the food.

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