

BIRD BANDING AT CHINO FARMS

BY JANE SCOTT

They call it "the bird banding station", but it is really just a small white hut set between the woods and hedgerows. Inside is a long table against the front wall with various pieces of equipment: metal loops with different size bands, special pliers to pinch them on, clipboards of charts to record the data, and plastic cones struck in tubes on small scales. Behind the table is a line of wooden pegs along the rafter, as well as shelves of reference books on the back wall and a US map crowded with little red dots.



Male and Female Northern Bobwhite

Photo Credit - Maren Gimpel

Bringing in the Birds

When I arrived the other morning, both the hut and the pegs were empty. The ornithologists, Jim Gruber and Maren Gimpel, together with Christie Phebus, a Washington College senior majoring in Environmental Studies, were all out checking the nets, but they soon arrived with clusters of white mesh bags, each containing a live bird, hanging from their belts. The bags were hung on the pegs in a line according to size.

Attending to the smaller birds first, Jim and Maren each removed one from its bag, gently cupping a hand over the bird's back and holding the legs between their third and fourth fingers while Christie entered the information on the chart. First, the species, age and sex; although the latter was not always immediately evident, as many young males look much like the females. They also measured the length of flight feathers and softly blew on the bird's breast feathers to expose the skin and see how much fat the bird was carrying: necessary fuel for its long flight ahead.

After the coded band was affixed to the leg, they placed the bird head down in the plastic cone to weigh it and finally released it through the open window, seemingly none the worse for its ordeal. I was impressed at how little the birds seem to mind all this handling. It's true some, particularly the cabbirds, squawked a little, but most seemed to take it all in stride.

Catching the Birds

The birds are caught in mist nets, a nearly invisible green mesh strung loosely on bars one above the other lengthwise along paths at the edge of the woods or fields. When a bird inadvertently flies into one, it drops into the fold of loose netting and is trapped. The nets are checked regularly and birds gently removed and put into those mesh bags for the trip back to the station.

When I was there in mid-September, the list of species was impressive. It included more familiar ones such as cabbirds, cardinals, and Carolina wrens, but also some not so readily noticed by many of us: American redstarts, male and female; a young male hummingbird; a Nashville and a Tennessee warbler; several common yellowthroats; a juvenile white eyed vireo; two ovenbirds; a chickadee; five red eyed vireos; a downy woodpecker; and a blue grosbeak.

This last, however, was not in its slate-blue breeding plumage, so it was not only hard for me to tell that it was a blue grosbeak, but even Jim was uncertain at first as to whether it was a young second-year male or a female. (He decided on the first.) There were also two indigo buntings that were brown instead of blue, having completed their late summer molt, and several bobolinks, also in winter plumage, on their way to winter homes in the South American rice fields.

I was surprised to find that some of these birds were infested with tiny ticks, usually on the head or near the eye where they could not pluck them off themselves. They were plucked off with tweezers and put in small vials to be sent to a lab at the University of Richmond to test for the bacteria that carry Lyme or some other tick-borne disease.

Collecting the Data

The banding operation at Chino Farms runs from March to late May in the spring, and again from August first to the end of November, to catch both the spring and fall migrations. All the data collected here and at other stations throughout the country are sent to the US Geological Survey in Patuxent, Maryland and provide invaluable information about the health of bird populations, including their preferred habitats, migration routes, wintering areas, and reproductive success.

The data also tell us something about the impact of certain environmental conditions and whether certain management strategies are proving effective. Those little red dots on Chino's map represent birds banded here but captured at other banding stations or picked up by private citizens. Each band contains an 800 number and a number code that tells where the bird was banded.

Some of the birds caught that morning had, in fact, been banded already, perhaps at Chino only a day or so previously. Even so, they were again checked for fat and weighed again to be sure they were getting enough fuel for the long trip ahead.

I learned a lot during my morning at the banding station and feel comforted that such capable people are keeping an eye on our bird populations.



Maren Gimpel removes a Wood Thrush from the mist net

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