



First published May 2, 2018



Young American Kestrels wait calmly to be banded (photo 6)

A BIRD IN THE HAND, 2.0

In order to band a bird, a bander has to catch it first. There are basically two ways birds can be caught: they are trapped in nets in one of several ways; or if cavity



1



2



3



4

nesters, such as birds nesting in supplied bird houses, they can be captured while sitting on the nest or until the young are not yet able to fly. My March 2014 column, version 1.0 of this topic, stlucieaudubon.org/hartBeat/hb2014/hb140302Tagging.html, discussed the multitude of reasons why naturalists want to band birds and follow their movements, as well as the first trapping technique: catching birds in mist nets or traps baited with food.

Mist nets are set up in places where birds frequently fly: along paths in woods, or between roosting or gathering areas and a food source. Another mist net technique features a long line of mist nets placed at the edge of a grassy field with a group of volunteers slowly walking through the field in a line toward the nets pushing the field birds before them and ultimately into the nets. For shorebirds, ducks and geese, a line of nets will be placed along the edge of a beach area, all rolled up in a coil, until a large gathering of the birds is relaxed, calm and comfortable. Then, nets are swiftly fired by canisters or rockets over the entire flock, catching large numbers of birds for banding all at one time.

Larger hawks and eagles are caught in bow nets which are spring loaded and baited with a live pigeon in a harness in which the trapper can cause the bird to flap around as if it is injured. When a hawk or eagle comes for the easy pigeon meal, the bow net is sprung over the bird to catch it for banding. This technique is most effective in locations where concentrations of hawks and eagles are migrating, and no, the pigeon is rarely ever harmed in any way.

The second method, banding birds found nesting in supplied housing, i.e. a bird house, is arguably easier: climbing a short ladder (*photo 1*) to the box and picking up the egg brooding bird off her nest. After the U S Geological Survey supplied band is affixed to a leg, the bander records all the details of the banding for filing with USGS, so that if or when the bird is ever captured again, its movements can be recorded. (*photo 2*) Here the bander admires the beautiful female Kestrel (*photo 3*) and holds it for a close-up photo for all of us to enjoy. (*photo 4*)

Two weeks later, after the young have hatched, the bander returns to band the nestlings. Climbing the same ladder, he carried all five of the nestlings in his hands (*photo 5*) without bothering to hold onto the ladder, a technique he has found quicker and easier than the more traditional 'place them in a bucket' method used by most banders. Gently placed on their backs on the tailgate of the bander's truck (*photo 6*) the birds were quite calm and relaxed. Two of them even fell asleep while waiting to be banded. (*photo 7*) The one young female and four males can be distinguished by the brown in the tail feathers of the female on the right of the group in the photo, compared to the four males' all black tail feathers.

The bander in the photos is my good friend and Purple Martin colony helper, Devich Farbotnik. His personal project, to bring back declining Kestrels to our home area in Pennsylvania, has led to his construction and placement of 77 Kestrel boxes in strategic locations. Last year Kestrels occupied 60 of his boxes and laid 274 eggs. Fifty-two of his pairs successfully hatched, raised and fledged 208 young Kestrels, every one of which Devich banded.

Since obtaining his USGS Federal Band Sub-Permit in 2010 he has banded a total of almost 1,000 young Kestrels plus a number of adults. Two of his 2017 banded Kestrels were subsequently re-caught and reported: one from Harrisburg, PA and one from JFK Airport in New York. But, Devich is much more than a bird bander. He has compiled a North American life list of 817 species, putting him in very elite company in that endeavor. Even more impressive is the fact that he has **photographed 810** of those species which places him in the top four or five bird photographer/listers in all of North America.

Most recently I texted him on December 14, 2017, when I first heard of a Mistle Thrush, a rare European thrush species, never before seen in North America, having just been discovered in New Brunswick, Canada. I reached him in his truck, half way there, having left from Pennsylvania after work that day. On December 15, he texted me his photo of the bird, taken shortly after his arrival that morning, having driven all night to get there. That's called dedication and determination.

In my first column on bird banding, version 1.0, I commented on how easy it is for us humans to be located and our comings and goings recorded by all kinds of surveillances. And now with the latest revelations of Facebook and Google tracking us, it is even scarier what others know about each of us. But tracking birds is still much more complicated, even as such information becomes ever more valuable and necessary if we are to protect and preserve the declining numbers of species



5

6(top)



7

and birds. The determined and dedicated work of banders like Devich (and Nan LaFramboise in version 1.0) is invaluable toward that effort.

For more, see: www.usgs.gov/centers/pwrc/science/north-american-bird-band-laboratory

Click thumbnails to see larger versions