

EARLY RESULTS OF BLACKBIRD BANDING AT AUBURN, ALABAMA, 1963*

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Information on movements and longevity of birds may be obtained from three sources after a trapping and banding operation. First, some bands may be recovered during the trapping from birds banded elsewhere. These are called foreign retraps. Second, birds banded during trapping and banding may be recovered at points removed from the banding site. These are called recoveries. Finally, retrapped birds previously banded at the same location will yield information on longevity. These are called returns. It is the purpose of this report to bring readers of Alabama Birdlife up to date on foreign retraps, recoveries, and returns from trapping by the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in 1963.

From January 16 to February 25, 1963, a floodlight trap (Mitchell, 1963) was operated intermittently at Auburn, Alabama, to obtain blackbirds for banding. This type of trap was developed by personnel of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center of the U. S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, which also provided funds for trap operation.

Keeler (1960) briefly described a floodlight trap operated by Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife biologists at Montgomery, Alabama, in January of 1960. Biologists of this Bureau also operated a floodlight trap in Montgomery during the winter of 1961-62, and at Auburn, Alabama, in January of 1962 (Dusi, 1962). Several thousand Brown-headed Cowbirds, Common Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Starlings were thus banded in the Montgomery-Auburn area before trapping began in 1963.

The floodlight trap used in 1963 consisted of a funnel-shaped net supported by two steel towers, each 30 feet tall, arranged so that the open end was approximately 30 feet high and 50 feet wide. This funnel led back to a cloth tent approximately 8 by 10 by 12 feet, in which a battery of six 1000 watt lights powered by a portable generator was placed. The trap was operated at night by turning on the lights and driving the birds from the roost toward the trap. Under favorable conditions, numbers of birds would fly into the tent where they could be captured by closing the front of the tent.

Table 1 summarizes the results of this trapping operation. Birds listed as "dead" are trap casualties, except for the Starlings which were gassed and disposed of rather than being banded or released. Trap casualties increased markedly in percentage of total when more than about 1,800 birds were caught. Also, it proved difficult to band more than 1,800-2,000 birds in one day. For these reasons it was desirable not to exceed a catch of about 2,000 birds.

*A contribution of the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Auburn University, Alabama Department of Conservation, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wildlife Management Institute, cooperating.

A total of 19,890 blackbirds were caught in 16 trapping operations. This figure includes 186 previously banded birds not included in Table 1. Of these, 14 were foreign retraps, 36 were returns from the 1962 banding, and the remainder were repeats of birds banded during the current banding operation. In addition, 65 recoveries had been reported by about July 1, 1963. Thus, 251 banded birds have yielded some information during the banding operation and in the succeeding 4 months.

Table 1. Summary of the results of floodlight trapping at Auburn, Alabama, January and February, 1963

Species	Banded	Dead	Released	Total
Brown-headed Cowbird	7631	180	1460	9271
Starling	1424	407	13	5511
Red-winged Blackbird	789	60	0	849
Common Grackle	3563	7	0	3570
Rusty Blackbird	0	132	371	503
Totals	13,407	4,453	1,844	19,704

There is more to bird banding than simply catching the bird and placing a band on its leg. Without an organization to store the banding data, and to retrieve it when called for, the actual banding would be meaningless. This organization is provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, through the Bird Banding Office of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland. Band numbers, together with appropriate data on species, age, sex, date, and location of banding are reported to Patuxent. Here, they are processed by automatic data-processing machines and filed for future reference. If a band is found on a dead or trapped bird, and if the finder sends the band number to Patuxent, then the banding pays off. When this happens both the finder and bander are notified -- the bander learns where and when the bird was found, and the finder learns where and when the bird was banded.

Foreign retraps and returns of Brown-headed Cowbirds. The cowbird data are interesting because there were actually more foreign retraps (13) than recoveries (8). This is accounted for by the 8 individuals that had been banded at Montgomery, Alabama, in the winters of 1960-61 and 1961-62 and retrapped during the 1963 operation. There were 13 repeats from the 1962 banding operation. The 8 recoveries reported through June, 1963, are too few to permit conclusions; however, they indicate that few, if any, of the wintering birds were local breeders, for all of the recoveries are from areas to the north and northeast of Auburn as far as Ontario, Canada, and Maine. The oldest Brown-headed Cowbird taken was one that was originally banded in March, 1958, making it at least 5 1/2 years old when retrapped.

Recoveries of Starlings. The Starling recoveries came from near the banding site and scattered to the northeast as far as Connecticut. The recoveries from near the banding site were scattered in time into June, 1963, suggesting that the banded birds were local breeders as well as migrants. It is of interest that no foreign retraps of Starlings occurred, even though 1000 Starlings were reported by Keeler (1960) to have been banded at Montgomery in January, 1960. Twenty-one Starlings banded at Auburn in 1962 were retrapped.

Recoveries and foreign retraps of Common Grackles. There were 35 recoveries and one foreign retrap of Common Grackles. All three of the local recoveries were taken during the trapping period and before the breeding season indicating that these winter birds do not breed locally. Recoveries of Common Grackles came from farther west than for Starlings and Brown-headed Cowbirds and as far north as Ontario. The one foreign retrap came from Port Huron, Michigan, the end point of the travels of one of our banded Grackles. Only one repeat from 1962 was taken.

In summary, of 13,407 bands placed and 19,704 birds handled, there were 251 banded birds that yielded information on movement or longevity. Migration of Starlings and Cowbirds from the roost tended to be to the northeast, whereas Common Grackle movements tended to be more nearly straight north. Cowbirds apparently exchange between the Montgomery and Auburn roosts, but there is no evidence that Starlings and Grackles do so.

REFERENCES CITED

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ADDITIONAL RECORDS AND A SPECIMEN OF THE EARED GREBE IN ALABAMA

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On December 19, 1963, I located two Eared Grebes (*Podiceps caspicus*) at the east end of Little Lagoon (Baldwin County), Alabama. This was my first observation of the species in winter plumage, and the obvious differences between it and the Horned Grebe (*P. auritus*) surprised me. The great extent of gray on the head and neck gave the bird more of the dull color of the Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) than of the contrast of black and white shown by the Horned Grebe. The Eared Grebe also gave the impression of having longer, more slender necks than does the Horned Grebe.

Realizing that there was no specimen of the Eared Grebe for Alabama, I made arrangements with owners of two boats to help me attempt the collection, but was not able to approach within range at the time. Two weeks later (January 3, 1964) I found two individuals at the same spot, however, and arranged with Fairly Chandler, of Magnolia Springs, to make another attempt the next morning. At that time (January 4) three of these birds were present, and Chandler's skill in handling the boat was a great asset in the collection of the first specimen for Alabama, now in the collection of Florida State University. After returning to land we visited an arm of Lake Shelby and were surprised to see two more Eared Grebes. In this instance we had both Horned and Pied-billed Grebes present for comparison.

Tom Imhof (*Alabama Birds*, p. 63) cited as the only previous record for the state an Eared Grebe seen at Little Dauphin Island (Mobile County), by Ava Tabor, Electa Levi, and Michael Caldwell on January 1 and March 26, 1960. A perusal of subsequent issues of *Audubon Field Notes* revealed no additional records.

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