



Why I Band Birds

By Christine Southwick

Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary program enrollee

I band birds to save habitats.

By finding out which birds use an area, and having the data to prove it, I can activate neighbors and go to council meetings, and say, "These birds need this urban forest, wetlands, or pond."

Habitat loss is the greatest danger to wildlife, and especially migrating birds. When a swampy area is drained, a pond filled in, or a creek put into pipes, migrating birds lose a vital refueling and resting stop. They may not have the energy to fly to the next known landmark. Death is a real consequence, so too is nesting failure due to depleted fat reserves.

I band for the physical exercise.

Birds are caught in banding nets that are 10 feet high and usually 30 feet long. There's a lot of reaching up and squatting down to carefully remove birds. Nets need to be checked every 20 minutes for the birds' safety.

MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) stations usually have an array of ten nets up for six hours at a time. These nets are spread across as many different types of habitat features as possible to catch the greatest number of species.

If a net has several birds, I have to speed walk to the next net so that the birds in that net don't wait too long. Then I hurry to the banding station to band each bird, determine its age and sex, general health and whether it is breeding or not. 30 feet times 10 equals 300 feet times 3 times an hour for six hours equals eighteen football fields. And that's not counting the travel distance between nets – easily a five-mile workout.

I band to keep my mind active.

I have to identify the species, know how to use the thick bander's guide, identify age by observing molt patterns, and correctly enter the 34 units of data recorded for each bird. I have to know how to safely hold the bird while I'm closing the band, and I have to recognize signs of stress and let the bird go even if I am not done. The safety of the bird is paramount.

I band for all those reasons. But really, I band for those awesome moments when I hold the birds safely in my hands, get the needed information, and then open my hands and let them fly free once again.

I like to think that each time I hold a bird I help make the world a safer place for them. I want the next generation to be able to hold a bird and soar with it as it takes wing from their hands.

