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THE F. B. I'S. OF THE BIRD WORLD

by

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A bird-banding club is a sort of a self-appointed intelligence agency to trail and ferret out the doings and movings-about of certain wild birds - feathered birds - those creatures of wondrous and secretive ways that are with us on the warm days, but gone when the cold days and lack of food come. So bird banding has become a fascinating game for enthusiasts in different parts of the world to greet each other and send messages on wild wings of their experiences. It is a good neighbor hobby that costs nothing and yields satisfactory profits in human contacts and bird lore.

In early days it was generally inferred that migrating birds followed the rule that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, and traveled directly from North to South, and vice versa. But the ornithological F. B. I's. of today have been fooled so many times by the wily birds that they have waked up to the fact that merely putting handcuffs on them doesn't hinder them from wandering all over the map. They may start dutifully toward the South in the fall, only to dodge Southeast, loiter a little to feed and rest, then turn directly Southwest, and finally Northeast from their starting point in a sort of an astonishing, wound-up route that at last lands them in their winter homes. All this bird banding has unfolded.

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1803
For more than two thousand years the movements and activities of birds have been studied. Bird banding in America dates from the time of Audubon, who about 1803, placed silver threads around the legs of a brood of phoebes and was rewarded the following season by having two of his marked birds return to nest in the same vicinity. In Europe the "ringing" of birds was attempted as early as 1710, but it was not until 1899 that systematic work ^{was} undertaken. Between that year and 1914, about twenty different organizations took up the work, one of the results of their activities being an accumulation of valuable information on the habits and migratory movements of birds.

The earliest investigators marked their birds in various ways, such

as dyeing or staining the flight or tail feathers, attaching records written on parchment, or by mutilating feathers, feet, or bill. And now it has come down to the most successful device of the numbered aluminum band or ring attached to the leg of a bird.

In the United States, active experimental work was begun in 1901, and several instances of bird banding were either planned or attempted during the next few years. One of these by the New Haven Bird Club was reported at the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1909, with the result that the American Bird Banding Association was organized in New York City on December 8th of that year. In 1920 the work was taken over by the United States Biological ^{Survey} ~~Suevey~~, now the Fish and Wildlife Service, as an aid in collecting information on migratory birds.

Some years ago this government bureau had collected as many as 400,000 records of banded birds, out of which 19,000 bands of recovered birds had been turned in. In 1936 it banded 125,000 wild ducks of which an average of 12% were recovered the first season, and over a period of years the records showed a recovery of from 20% to 25%. To date (April 1942) the banding of all North American birds has reached a total of more than 4,000,000.

Between the years 1938-1941, The Western Bird Banding Association in cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service, color-banded 11,660 young gulls of three species. Reed Ferris of Beaver, Oregon, banded 1958 western gulls at Haystack Rock, and 283 of the same species at Three Arch Rocks, Oregon, Carl Richardson banded 325 California gulls at Klamath Falls, Oregon.

One of the large banding returns has been on waterfowl, especially ducks. F. H. Kortright, author of that recent and most complete volume on "The Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America," says, "Of all the ducks, the one that is of the greatest importance to man is unquestionably the mallard, but on this continent the American pintail has the widest breeding ground of all ducks."

One day when we were visiting the Zoological Park at San Diego, we were treated to a rare sight. We were standing at the edge of one of the

ponds that drop down the woodsy ravine like a cascade of little lakes, when we heard a dim roaring sound like a heavy wind rushing through the trees. Looking up, we saw a big flock of ducks circling and then dissolving like a cloud of smoke. Then from quite an altitude they came volplaning down with a swish, and without a wing movement glided for some distance just above the surface. They were pintails.

A number of flocks came in and settled among the mixture of Canada geese, a few mallards, scaups, baldpates, and noisy foreigners. In all, there must have been some 1500 ducks on the lake. By far the most of them were the slim pintails with their glossy-brown heads, white breasts and chin straps running up back of their ears, their sides pin-striped in fine lines of black and white. They rode the water like trim, painted gondolas.

Then we watched the banding process. A big wire cage was brought in and several sacks of cracked barley, a large quantity of which was thrown inside. The ducks had just come in from the North and were ready for a meal. There was a rush for the door and they crowded and jostled to get in. Most of them were the pintails with a sprinkling of other birds. Two bird banders stepped inside carrying long strings of aluminum bands. As each bird was banded, the number on the ring and the sex of the bird was called out and taken down by a third man outside. Then the bird was allowed to walk out of the door or was picked up by one of the group and tossed into the air.

Some winged upward while others waddled down to the water, shaking their pointed tails and casting back a slightly contemptuous eye. Soon the lake was covered with a flotilla of pointed-tailed little craft rocking contentedly on the water again. When the cage was emptied, more grain was thrown in and the game commenced all over. Some of the banded pintails marched back in to finish their dinners, fearless and indifferent to all this banding business. Some three hundred ducks were banded.