



Chatfield Banding Station Report, Spring 2020

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Introduction: Annually since 2002, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies has partnered with Denver Audubon to run a spring banding station near the Audubon Nature Center at the south end of Chatfield State Park. This station has dual goals of providing a valuable education and engagement program for students as well as the general public and obtaining data to increase our understanding of the full life cycle of migratory songbirds.

This year, as COVID-19 descended upon us, we encountered unique challenges that prevented us from running a normal banding program. We provide this report to ensure that we have a record of what we hope will be a one-time experience.

The Spring When COVID-19 Hit

Our planning for 2020 spring banding at Chatfield was well underway when the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Colorado on March 9. We would spend the next six weeks trying to learn enough about COVID-19 to understand what we could safely do in terms of banding this spring. State and county restrictions were first announced in mid-March and were increased rapidly as more infections were diagnosed. In addition to meeting those ever-changing restrictions, we needed to determine if a group activity like bird banding, where people normally worked closely together and shared bird bags, banding tools, data materials, etc., could be effectively run with the level of protection we felt was necessary to avoid the spread of the virus.

Near the end of April, we finally made the decision that we should not try to run the station. At that time, there were too many unknowns about how COVID-19 spread to be comfortable with any design that included multiple people trying to work together and touching the same nets, bags, tools, etc. There also were funding issues, since there would be no school groups or other folks visiting and thus paying registration fees.

Virtual Education Programs on Banding

Although we could not run a “normal” station, we decided that there was a value in providing what we hoped would be stimulating educational experiences that people could access from

home. We quickly devised a plan to present a live, one-hour, virtual banding demonstration from the Chatfield Nature Center from 8 to 9 a.m. three mornings per week for three weeks, starting May 11. We set up five nets near the Nature Center feeders. In the photo on the right you can see one of the nets with one of the feeders in the background to the left.



Bird Conservancy educators managed the technology and helped with the daily presentations. Two banding station volunteers participated each morning – one recorded and the other checked nets, letting the bander know as birds got caught, and doing other tasks as needed. Denver Audubon staff engaged with people passing by so that our on-line programs were not disturbed.

We did this while adjusting to the awkward new normal, with everyone wearing masks, maintaining a separation of six feet, and using hand sanitizer regularly. Only one person touched each of the various pieces of equipment - banding tools, data notebook and pencils, bird bags and nets - each morning. Volunteer Glenda Brown made some masks for us, as they were in short supply at this time during the pandemic and we wanted to make sure everyone had one. (The only time anyone was unmasked was when they were on camera.)

We used a Lenovo tablet that was connected to a hotspot for WiFi connectivity. We used Zoom as our platform for connecting with the general public from the comfort of their own homes. The bander would talk through the banding process when there was a bird to band. There was one educator on the other side of the screen who would teach more about migration, the banding process, operate the camera and read questions that participants wrote into the chat box.

Unfortunately, we caught far fewer birds than we anticipated. Historically, running nets near the feeders has produced birds, since they are coming to a reliable food source. This particular May was unusually quiet, and several mornings we had only one or two birds to share with our virtual audience. This led us to prepare a series of slides about the station and spring migration, and a second Bird Conservancy educator, from her home office, shared these as needed with the audience.

Approximately 200 people participated in at least one of the virtual sessions we produced during May. Feedback from participants was positive, and what we learned (see final section of this report for details) helped us do better programming over the summer and during fall banding.

The photo to the right shows the basic set-up for the banding demo, with the tablet camera set up to film the bander with a bird. In the photo on the left, volunteer Cacie Nickolaus records data, separated from the bander by at least six feet.



Symbols of banding in 2020 – A mask, a glove, and a Woodhouse Scrub-Jay, a species rarely caught at the banding station but frequently found feeding at the Nature Center.



Birds

As mentioned above, we caught far fewer birds than we had anticipated. In 10 days, we caught only 47 individual birds.¹

Interesting Returns

Those 47 birds included a high percentage (19%) of birds that were returns – that is, birds that we caught this year that had been banded in a prior season by us. Of particular note was that four of the five Spotted Towhees we captured this year had already been caught and banded by us, one from each 2019, 2018, 2015 and 2014. The ones banded in 2014 and 2015 had bands

¹ Full list of species caught is found at the end of this report.

that were very worn. Band wear on Spotted Towhees has been attributed to its foraging behavior - they scratch around in the leaf litter on the ground with their strong legs.² We replaced both of these bands with shiny new ones. It is also worth noting that the 2014 and 2015 birds were both banded at the Nature Center; it is likely that these guys (they were both males) have spent their entire life enjoying the seeds provided by Denver Audubon!

Banded Birds Spotted in the Field

Birding was one of very few fun and interesting activities that remained safe during COVID. Consequently, there were lots of birders out, and around Chatfield they spotted and photographed birds that we had previously banded, including a House Wren and a Yellow Warbler, as well as a pair each of Red-eyed Vireos and American Redstarts. Of most interest was the resighting by several birders of a probable hybrid Black/Eastern Phoebe that we had banded in 2019. Rob Raker, who had photographed it after the banding season in 2019, found it again this year (see photo below on the left). The bird on the right below and also photographed by Rob, most likely an Eastern Phoebe, is its mate. This pair, which nested under the Waterton bridge and another pair that nested near the restrooms at the north end of the Audubon parking lot, generated a lot of discussion among birders this season. Black Phoebes are common in California and parts of the southwest down into Mexico and the Eastern Phoebe is usually found throughout the eastern half of the United States. Both have become more common in our area in recent years, and appear to already be hybridizing.



² Sakai, Walter H. 2018-2019. Band Wear in Spotted Towhees and Other Passerines. *North American Bird Bander*, Vol43 No.4, Vol 44 No. 1

Research Not Conducted

Our biggest disappointment was not being able to participate as a data collection site for two major studies being done by CSU graduate students working with the Genoscape Project. These projects, aimed at learning more about how climate change is impacting Yellow Warblers and American Redstarts, required blood samples in addition to the feather samples that we have routinely collected for the Genoscape Project since 2015. We were set up to do this work until COVID-19 changed our plans.

What We Learned

As I write this report in March of 2021, May of 2020 seems like ancient history, so much has happened and changed since the early days of this pandemic. Although we did not view our experience with banding this spring as exactly a “success” – 10 limited days, too few birds, virtual programs only – we learned a lot that allowed us to have a much more successful summer and fall:

- ***We learned about COVID-19.*** What scientists understood about COVID-19 improved on almost a daily basis. For example, by summer it was understood that the virus primarily is transmitted from person-to-person through respiratory droplets; it rarely spreads through contact with solid surfaces. It also was becoming clear that the biggest problems were groups of people in close contact indoors; outdoor activities, if people wore masks and worked at socially distancing, were relatively safe. This knowledge allowed us to begin planning for a fall banding season that would be “almost normal”.

- ***We learned about virtual, live programming.***
 - A strong hotspot signal was key to the quality of the live video.
 - We needed to experiment to find the best natural lighting so the bird could be seen well by participants.
 - If the bander wore a white shirt it was easier to see the bird’s colors.
 - We needed to have plenty of back-up visuals to use when there are no birds. We fumbled through a couple of programs with insufficient birds before volunteer Tom Williams suggested that our job would be easier if we had power point slides related to birds, migration, etc. ready to go that could be pulled up at a moment’s notice to fill gaps.
 - We learned to engage the audience with questions and interesting facts.
 - It takes three – a bander and an educator/camera person on site and a second educator providing back-up off-site.
 - But keep it simple – This process does not require complicated or expensive equipment or technology.

With these lessons learned, we were prepared to augment our small group in-person fall visitor program with once a week virtual programs for those who were unable to get out to the station.

- ***We learned that people needed and wanted activities that both engaged their minds and brought them joy.*** Our virtual programming was not perfect, but people were understanding of the problems and grateful for what we were able to provide. It led us to try other virtual programming over the summer and through the fall. We have reached a wider audience – there are people who found us on-line who have since participated in in-person activities as restrictions have lifted; people with mobility issues and/or COVID concerns who are unable to get out in the field are able to experience birds in the wild through our virtual activities; people from other states and other countries have joined our on-line programs.
- ***We learned that our staff and volunteers will do almost ANYTHING to get outdoors and close up and personal with birds!*** A slow day at the banding station is better than anytime indoors, isolated at one’s desk! Seriously, this experiment would have been impossible without the dedication of our experienced and flexible staff and volunteers. Thanks to all!

Species	NewlyBanded	Return	Recovery	Total
Mourning Dove	2			2
Downy Woodpecker	2	1		3
Woodhouse Scrub-jay	3			3
Black-capped Chickadee	4	1		5
White-breasted Nuthatch	2			2
House Wren	3			3
Gray Catbird	2			2
House Finch	2			2
Dark-eyed Junco, Pink-sided	1			1
Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow	3			3
Mountain White-crowned Sparrow	2			2
Lincoln's Sparrow	1			1
Green-tailed Towhee	1			1
Spotted Towhee	1	4		5
Yellow-breasted Chat	1			1
Red-winged Blackbird	5	2		7
Brown-headed Cowbird	2	1		3
Yellow Warbler	1			1
TOTAL = 17	38	9	0	47