

Somers School Camp Banding Report

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For the past seven years I have been a nature study teacher at the Children's School Camp at Somers on Western Port Bay, Victoria. As each camp of 160 boys or girls lasts only 10 days, lessons must, of necessity, be both inspirational and actively reinforced to make a lasting impression on eleven-year olds. The most successful lessons in accomplishing both requirements have undoubtedly been those involving bird banding activities.

As I hope soon to attempt a Science degree, this will be my last year at Somers and the cessation of my banding programme here. It is important, I think, to present not only programme results but an assessment of the educational value of my programme to the child and its publicity value to the Australian Bird Banding Scheme.

The Banding Programme

This has consisted of:

- (i) Trapping and colour-banding of adults and running young of the Red-capped Dotterel (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) at the creek mouth at Somers.
- (ii) Banding of all species caught in mist nets at set locations through the foreshore scrub at Somers.
- (iii) Colour-banding study of the Southern Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*).
- (iv) Participation in co-operative Silvereye project.

The children's participation in this programme has included:

- (a) discussion of banding aims, methods, equipment, lists, and interesting recoveries; (b) lectures on the ethics of bird banding and the licensing and training requirements; (c) help in carrying and setting up of equipment; (d) net watching; (e) recording of banding details; (f) sight records, searches for colour-banded individuals; (g) looking out for recoveries after return home; (h) receipt of news-sheet including banding news.

Publicity

It has been said that public banding should always be avoided, but, I believe, where full instruction to a sympathetic audience can be given, as with our planned work with the children at the camp, nothing but good can come of it.

Publicity to encourage recovery of bands is welcomed by all banders and we have accomplished this to some degree. Twenty-one thousand children and 1,000 teachers have



• "Esmerelda", the female Red-capped Dotterel at nest. Photo: R. Nuske

passed through the camp. All are aware of the need to return band information to the CSIRO. Newspapers have given us excellent publicity. In May 1966, the Melbourne *Sun-News Pictorial* devoted half of the middle pages to photographs of our banding of a Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*).

Dotterel Study

The star performers for the children have been the Red-capped Dotterels (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) which nest between August and February by the mouth of the creek which flows by the camp. They are exceptionally approachable when nesting and the recognition of individuals through colour-banding has added to the intense interest that their behaviour creates.

Ian May, a reputable young Melbourne ornithologist, had his first grounding at Somers six years ago. Ian's main memories of the camp are not campfires, games or boating lessons but the little dotterels nesting on the beach.

Unfortunately for the dotterels the area is a popular holiday resort and despite our efforts at decoy and protection the birds suffer from considerable human interference. Of 42 eggs laid

last year only 5 reached the hatching stage, 10 were washed away by high tides, 8 were destroyed or stolen by known human agency and the remaining 19 were deserted or fell to unknown predators.

The best remembered incident of the high tide threats was our successful attempt to force one female dotterel to adopt her own eggs which had been placed eight feet above the original site. This was only achieved after one hour of simulated attacks and threats to her original site, a midway position and then the new site. For the first 15 minutes she steadfastly returned to the bare sand of the original site. Not till tiny landmarks were transferred and the original site altered, did she begin to show indecision and finally acceptance.

To our delight, Esmerelda (see plate), our first and favourite dotterel of last season, successfully reared one youngster at her fourth attempt.

Yellow Robin Movements

The Yellow Robin has been the most popular bush bird and was the subject of our other colour-banding study at Somers. The movements of this supposedly sedentary bird are still a mystery to us since our first banding revealed that it was not the same pair that greeted us on each of our morning birds walks. Our first 50 robins produced only one retrap and three sight records, none later than 10 months after banding.

Banding over the past two years has tended to confirm this pattern of short term residence followed by complete disappearance.

Subject to approval, Mr. Neil Weatherill,

fellow teacher and bander, will continue this work on both dotterels and robins for the next two or three seasons.

Other Records

Other significant records have been the periodic trapping of Pink Robins (*Petroica rodinogaster*) and the group re-trapping of Red-browed Finches (*Aegintha temporalis*) at different localities two or three years later. A White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) banded as a runner stayed about the nature room for five years and provided excellent lesson material on territory. Bobby and Betty, Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) nestlings, provided useful age plumage sex studies which were communicated to ex-campers through our nature magazine "Casey's Someries". Periodic summaries of our bird banding activities were featured in this tiny publication which was sent to all junior nature clubs in Victoria.

There is no doubt in my mind that the banding lessons make a great impact on most of the children—their faces show it as they see their first bush bird in close-up. Judging from the comments, the first urge to conserve must occur to many at this moment.

Banding is an ideal teaching activity. Its immediate value to science is easily demonstrated and the children's participation in this work through recoveries, make a good follow-up.

An analysis of our banding results will be left to a later issue.

Alan J. Reid, Somers, Victoria.

Assistance To South Australian Banders

An amendment to the *South Australian Fauna Conservation Act*, passed in December, 1965, extends the working range of South Australian banders holding permits from the S.A. Fisheries and Fauna Conservation Department to fauna reserves, sanctuaries and game reserves.

The principal Act, passed in November, 1964, precluded banders from these areas. The passing of this Act seriously restricted some South Australian banders in their work, particularly with projects associated with waders and seabirds.

The restrictive sections of the Act were discussed with Mr. A. C. Bogg, Director of the Fisheries and Fauna Conservation Department, and he gave the matter his sympathetic attention. He knew in some detail the work being carried out in banding waders at the I.C.I. Saltfields, a

sanctuary some 17 miles from Adelaide. Over 2000 waders, mainly Red-necked Stints (*Calidris ruficollis*) and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*C. acuminata*) have been banded in this area. Other projects affected were the banding of seabirds on various off-shore islands, and the banding of passerines in several sanctuaries in the Mt. Lofty Ranges.

The matter was taken up with the Minister for Agriculture and the Flora and Fauna Advisory Committee, and it was generally agreed that this work, which could produce some extremely interesting recoveries, should not be curtailed.

Accordingly, an amendment to the Act was drafted and this received the assent of the South Australian Parliament on December 9, 1965.

Max Waterman, Magill, S.A.