



PRAIRIE CREEK BANDING LAB (PCBL)

Examining The Lives Of Birds In North Central Florida: A Typical Day

It's a warm October dawn: the air is humid, the ground is damp, the mosquitoes are vicious, and our region is experiencing the peak of fall songbird migration. My interns and I hastily unfurl nets in anticipation of what this morning may bring and what they, as students, will learn.

Every half hour, we run our circuit of 12 mist nets strategically situated along edge habitat in a mosaic of hardwood hammocks and old field grasslands. The nets are so sheer that they appear translucent, and, when a bird flies into one, it is enmeshed in one of the baggy pockets. We approach a net and observe two small bodies seemingly dangling in midair.

Extraction of birds from mist nets is an art. It takes keen observation and plenty of practice to be able to carry it out in a manner that is quick, safe, and that minimizes any stress the birds might experience. We focus first on the smaller of the two birds – a house wren. I showcase my method of extraction to my interns by narrating my mental process. My interns listen intently as I list out a step-by-step process, which culminates in the bird's release from the net. The wren is placed into a small, cotton bag until we return to the lab for processing. I offer the opportunity to extract the second bird, a Northern cardinal, to one of my interns. Once the second extraction is complete, we proceed along the circuit, extracting birds from each net as we make our way back to the lab.

There are a number of variable factors to record when a bird is processed, including age, sex, wing chord length, and weight. We will not band a bird we cannot identify. The interns must accurately examine the flight feathers, the plumage, and the overall condition of the bird in order to ensure that the data we record and submit is pure and consistent.

A lightweight aluminum band, inscribed with a unique 9-digit identification code, is secured to the lower leg of the bird with a pair of banding pliers. Each bird requires a specific band size and will carry the band for the duration of its life. If and when the bird is recaptured, its code is reported to the Federal Banding Lab in order to discover where the bird was originally banded. This information is crucial to our understanding of how migratory birds navigate the landscape, and to establish site fidelity for wintering, breeding, or stopover sites.

It's now roughly 11am, and the heat of midday sun is fast approaching. It's time to close the nets. My interns and I have had a successful day of banding. While PCBL is still a fledgling facility, I hope that its presence in the region will have a lasting impact in the avian conservation arena and will continue to serve as a vital resource for students and professionals. PCBL is a collaborative initiative between the Alachua Audubon Society and ACT.

Story and Photo By Jonathan Varol,
Alachua Audubon Society



Indigo Bunting