



## Guidelines for photographing birds during banding projects

Having birds in the hand during banding offers a rare opportunity to study plumage details. Photographing the birds provides a permanent record of key features while minimizing extra handling time – by taking a few standard photos, detailed study can be deferred until later. This document provides some basic guidelines for such photography, focusing on selecting individuals and key features, how to hold birds for photography, tips on lighting/background, and advice for managing photo files.

### 1) Choosing which birds to photograph

For most banding programs, it is impractical and excessive to photograph all birds banded. Selection of targets will vary depending on project objectives, but common guidelines include:

- Rare species – since they are seldom caught, there are few opportunities for study, and there may be an advantage to having some photos archived if questions ever arise about the species.
- Uncertain identification – regardless of how experienced banders are, there are always occasional birds that are particularly challenging; photographing them allows for other banders to provide their input on these individuals later.
- Species with subtle molt limits – the camera is sometimes better at recognizing these than the bander's eye, so when in doubt, taking a photo and reviewing it later may resolve some ageing uncertainties (woodpeckers are a good example).
- Presumed residents – in some cases there is value in comparing the appearance of resident individuals from one year to the next, especially in species where molt strategies remain poorly understood.

### 2) Features to photograph

For most birds, a standard set of three photographs is recommended:



**Body** – may provide useful reference in itself, but also good for cross-referencing photos if there are doubts about ID or labelling



**Wing** – most likely to show molt limits; try to include the entire wing if possible, since all feathers may be of interest (can always crop later)



**Tail** – both shape and pattern may be of interest; try to ensure that at least on one side of the tail, all 6 rectrices are visible

Some species have additional features that vary by age and sex, or are of interest for other reasons. These may include the underwing (e.g. blackbirds, grosbeaks), undertail (e.g. redpolls, catbirds), feet (e.g. Palm Warbler), etc.

### 3) Recommendations for holding birds

How to hold birds for photography is largely a matter of personal preference, as long as bird safety and efficiency are prioritized. To photograph the body, a standard “photographer’s grip” can be used. To photograph the wing and tail, a modified bander’s grip works best. The wing should be held as fully open as possible, by gently pinching the wrist between the thumb and forefinger, or forefinger and middle finger (the latter is preferable in that it allows a better view of the median and lesser coverts, but it can be more difficult to secure, especially with restless birds, so for the sake of time and minimizing stress, the former is often best). Some birds fan their tail naturally; if not, try to spread the tail using the thumb and forefinger, so that individual rectrices are clearly visible. For some species (e.g. Yellow-rumped Warbler) it is also good practice to try to include the uppertail coverts if possible.

### 4) Tips on camera settings, lighting, and background

On most cameras, automatic exposure using the macro setting produces the best results. Photos in the shade turn out best, as bright sunlight can produce glare that distorts colours and may obscure molt limits. Try to select a dull, uniform background, and above all ensure that there aren’t patches of sunlight creating a distracting contrast. Ensure that the camera’s date/time settings are accurate; this is especially important if taking photos of multiple individuals of the same species, to allow accurate cross-referencing of banding data and photos.



**Ideal** – a dull uniform background allows to focus to remain entirely on the bird (a wall, calm water, or lawn all provide this effect)



**Okay** – if the macro focus does not blur the background, patches or patterns of different colours can distract from the bird



**Undesirable** – bright sunlight on the wing distorts natural colours, and the contrasting light and dark background adds confusion

### 5) Archiving photos

Photos of birds have the potential to be very useful – but only if good data management is practiced. At the very minimum, each photo should be renamed to identify the species, age, and sex of the subject. However, in most cases there is value in providing additional details. The following components are recommended:

- Species (standard four-letter code)
- Age (e.g. juv, hy, ahy, sy, asy, ty, aty)
- Sex (e.g. m, f, u)
- Band number
- Photographer’s initials (especially if many individuals are contributing to the collection)
- Location (optional – valuable only if photos are being collected at multiple sites)
- Date (important for comparing repeated photos of the same individuals, use dd-mmm-yy format)
- Feature (e.g. wing, tail, body)

e.g. WTSP hy u 2241-37895 MAG MBO 12aug10 wing

(note that capitalization as shown makes it easier to skim lists of photo files, and listing items in this order allows for easy sorting by species, age, and sex, as well as individuals by date)