

# News, Notes, Comments

The *NABB* editorial staff is looking for someone to edit and publish the "Significant Encounters" column, since this is the last issue for Barny Dunning. This column provides a source of information banders can use.

If you are interested in compiling and editing this column, please contact any one of the regional editors of *NABB*.

## Some Unexpected Primary-covert Molt Limits

On 28 Jun 2006, while running a banding station in Humboldt County, CA, for the Humboldt Bay Bird Observatory, KMB noticed symmetric molt limits within the primary coverts of two unrelated birds: a Western Wood-Pewee (WEWP, *Contopus sordidulus*) of unknown sex and a female Brown-headed Cowbird (BHCO, *Molothrus ater*). The WEWP had replaced the inner three coverts on each wing and the BHCO the inner four. On both birds, the retained (outer) coverts appeared to be juvenal feathers and the replaced ones did not. Both birds were recorded as SY, based on these retained juvenal feathers; the BHCO also had retained, juvenal underwing coverts.

It can be assumed that these molt limits in the primary coverts resulted from incomplete preformative molts the previous fall. WEWP lacks a prealternate molt while that of BHCO is, at most, limited (Pyle 1997). WEWP typically replaces all feathers except the primary coverts during the preformative molt, while BHCO typically replaces all feathers except a varying number of underwing coverts (Pyle 1997). Thus, one would expect only juvenal primary coverts on SY WEWPs and only formative primary coverts on SY BHCOs.

Most species with incomplete primary-covert replacement patterns (e.g., woodpeckers and passerines with "eccentric" preformative molts; Pyle 1997) usually replace consecutive *outer* feathers, although PP has seen some second-basic woodpeckers with replaced inner primary coverts and KMB has reported a similar phenomenon in the Eastern Wood-Pewee (*C.*

*virens*; Burton 2002). PP also very rarely has seen retained outer and medial primary coverts in SY and ASY blackbirds. It should be noted that PP derived most of his conclusions on molt extents (Pyle 1997) based on examination of closed-wing specimens, on which the inner primary coverts cannot be viewed without damaging the specimens, and these more-recent findings underscore the difficulty of analyzing these feathers on traditionally-prepared skins.

Partial replacement of primary coverts during the preformative molt may prove to be more frequent and occur in a wider range of species than is indicated in the literature, and we encourage banders to examine closely the inner primary coverts on birds in the hand. Replacement of the inner primary coverts would be most likely to occur on birds that typically have either a complete preformative molt (e.g., pigeons, cuckoos, hummingbirds, swallows, many blackbirds, and weavers) or an incomplete preformative molt that includes outer primaries (including woodpeckers, many flycatchers, some wrens, thrashers, Cardinalid buntings, and some orioles). Although this pattern of replacement apparently is very infrequent, it may provide an additional means of recognizing occasional first-cycle birds. Intra-tract molt limits such as these are often easier to recognize and interpret than inter-tract limits.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Burton, K. M. 2002. Primary-covert replacement in the Eastern Wood-Pewee. *N. Am. Bird Bander* 27:12-14.
- Pyle, P. 1997. Identification guide to North American birds, Part 1. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA.

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