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To Band or Not to Band

The caveat to the following is that in my experience, every station is different. MAPS stations that are suppose to have an identical protocol are not. So tweak the following to your needs.

The following was vetted by a pair of epidemiologists, who are birders, and I incorporated their comments/concerns by adjusting certain aspects of the protocol below.

Can you safely band at your station? Does the area have open access to the public? No go. My primary banding station (Zuma Canyon) is NPS land and is presently closed with a locked gate, although folks can walk in. The station is, however, off-trail by ~ 50 m. Next week, I will band at the Burns Reserve, an U.C. field station, with no public access. C.J.'s station is on private property.

One should consult the property owner.

You can no longer have visitors, observers, classes, and such. It will be a bare bone operation.

Do you band in a building?

Can you maintain social distance inside? Most banding buildings I have seen are small building, often crowded with banders, like the NYC subway during rush hour. How is the entrance? Often, there is only one door. Banding outside allows everyone to spread out.

Banders

Do you have a cohort of available, experienced banders familiar with the station?

The key word is "experienced." The next point will explain why.

This means novices and trainees may no longer be allowed, as almost all aspect of teaching them is more often than not, hands on, and one on one, in close quarters. To minimize contact, novices can no longer shadow experienced banders.

One bander reported he now bands just with his wife, to minimize transmission.

Bander's personal hygiene?

Everyone will wear a mask, although this creates a bit of a dilemma, when blowing feathers. Of course, one can probably lower the mask when making net rounds. However, removing a mask too often can lead to contamination.

My brother who is a hospital pharmacist said, other than the N95 mask, most mask are only partially helpful protection at best. He thinks the best thing about even homemade masks is that it reminds one about touching one's face and social distancing.

Sufficient amount of hand sanitizer. Dilute chlorox, hydrogen peroxide, lysol, and ... can also be made available. Individual sanitizers are probably best.

Can your banders set up mist nets, make net rounds, extract, band, and process birds, and take down nets SOLO?

Each bander will band in a separate area at the banding station maintaining social

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distance. We band outdoors, at opposite ends of the picnic table, or on separate TV tray-like tables and chairs.

Disinfect before setting up nets, so nets are not contaminated. Ditto for net rounds.

Banding Equipment

Do you have enough equipment?

Each bander uses his/her own set of gear (pliers, ruler, electronic balance or Pesola spring balances, weighing tubes, optivisor, net pole, etc.). Own water for skulling. No sharing. So this means his/her own field guide and set of Tabular Pyles.

After the banding session, all equipment should be sterilized appropriately before re-use.

Extracting birds?

This is to be done solo. Cloth bags will be contaminated upon use. The extractor is the best person to process the bird(s). Most stations “share” birds. Someone may process birds that others have extracted, but must remember not to touch their faces and sanitize afterwards. Cloth bags should never be re-used. They should be washed in hot, soapy water before reuse.

Processing a bird?

Some banders use a straw to focus the stream of air, rather than just blowing 3 or 4 times. This might be better, in terms of minimizing spraying droplets. I use half of a typical fast-food joint plastic straw, which lessens the force needed to force air through the tube.

Often, one can minimize blowing by not recording some of the physiological conditions.

A second bander should not touch a recently banded bird. Since we know the virus can “stick” to hair, we can reasonably assume the virus can “stick” to feathers too.

Many old timers simply used good ole spit to wet the head to skull birds. We now use water. By the same reasoning above, a second bander should not handle the bird. Skulling probably should be minimized. E.g. there is no need to skull a White-crowned Sparrow, as its age is rather obvious.

What about bands?

Even the process of taking band out of (in my case) film canisters can be a source of transmission. We have a designated person to take out, drop bands onto individualized small dishes for the bander to retrieve. This person maintains sterile technique using a spray bottle of alcohol.

Some stations have bands on wires that help minimize contamination.

It is possible to make separate strings of bands for each bander.

What about data entry?

There is the issue of multiple hands touching the common datasheets and pencils/pens. The simplest way is for each bander to enter data on his/her own datasheet. The bander should photograph the datasheet and send it to the data entry person to avoid potential contamination.

At my station, banders recite their data for a common recorder.

A suggestion to quickly get things onto eBird is a good idea, as it keeps everyone in the

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loop, in this time of social isolation.

Other protocol?

Many stations make area searches. These will be done solo.

We happen to collect feathers for the Genoscape Project. Tape, do not lick the envelope!

We collect ectoparasites. Done individually. No help pulling ticks and lice off birds.

We put the ectoparasites in a 2 ml cryovial with EtOH.

Things like Potter Traps should be maintained by one bander.

Last.

I do not consider this written in stone, and further adjustments will be made. You are free to use and modify the above. Certain, if you have some interesting and useful tweaks to keep us all safe, please post it for all to learn from.

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