

Q.P.W.S Ph 0754596110



Finding birds with bands or other marks

The Australian Museum often receives calls regarding birds that have a band on the leg or some other form of marking. There are different types of bands, which are placed on birds for different reasons by different people.



Australian White Ibis with leg bands
Richard Major © Australian Museum

Bird banding is used as an easy way to identify individual birds when conducting research on these highly mobile animals. The most common method of marking is to put a metal or plastic band around the birds' leg. Both types of band weigh very little, and when placed correctly, do not interfere with the bird going about its' daily activities.

So, what should you do if you happen to see a live banded bird or find a dead bird with a band on its' leg? The answer will depend on which of the four main types of banding procedure was used.

1. Numbered metal bands.

The Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme (ABBBS) issues specially made bands to bird banders who have registered research projects with the Scheme. Each band is stamped with a unique number and the ABBBS address in Canberra. If you find a dead bird with such a band, record the band number, the species (if known), date, locality and cause of death (if known). Remove the band (or dried leg bearing the band), flatten the band if possible, pad it and post to ABBBS in an envelope also containing the above information plus the finder's details. The Scheme will contact the person who banded the bird. It will return information to you on the time since banding

and the distance and direction the bird had moved from the banding site. If you happen to find a bird with a band bearing an overseas address, advise the ABBBS of its details and they will contact the relevant authority.

Alternatively, the bird and information can be forwarded to staff in the Bird Section at the Museum. We will then contact the ABBBS on your behalf. The information on the banding event will be returned to you.

2. Numbered metal band plus coloured plastic bands or flag(s).

For some studies, banders not only use the metal bands described above, but also attach coloured bands in a unique combination. This permits the recognition of individual birds in a study population without having to recapture them to read the band number. Coloured flags are used by researchers studying movements of shorebirds along the East Asian Flyway; each banding locality or country has a different colour combination. If you see a live bird bearing coloured bands, record the exact sequence of colours and position on each leg, e.g. red over blue (left lower leg), green over orange (right upper leg), metal (right lower leg). This information, together with the species, date, locality, and your address details to ABBBS. If the bird is dead, treat as described above.

3. Coloured bands (usually plastic) with letters, year and number code.

Racing pigeon owners identify their birds with a band that gives a coded identification of the birds' origins. Occasionally, pigeons become lost or are injured or killed. If you find such a pigeon (the coral pink legs are a good clue to the identification), note the information on the band and phone the Australian Pigeon Fanciers' Association Inc. It will direct you to the branch or owner that registered the pigeon.

4. Coloured metal or plastic bands without letters or numbers, or metal bands with stamped letters or numbers.

Aviculturists and zoos often use such bands on cage birds. Sometimes escapees are found, however, there is no central office where aviary escapees can be reported. Contact your local pet store, veterinarian, pound, animal shelter or newspaper for birds reported missing.

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