



## EPISODE 8

# Bird Banding and the WBBA with Holly Garrod

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**INTRO:** Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

**CHRISTA ROLLS:** First, I wanted to let you know that I have a free guide to learning all about bird identification. After going through this workbook, you'll know about the five keys to bird identification: size and shape, color and pattern, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sound. When you understand the main components of identifying a bird, you'll begin to feel more confident with your birding and identification skills. This process will not just help you with identifying birds by sight and sound easier, but it will also help deepen your connection with nature. To get this free guide, just visit the podcast show notes at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Now, today I'm so excited to share this episode with you. I met with Holly Garrod, the President of the Western Bird Banding Association, to talk all about her work and how she got started in the birding world, why bird banding is

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important, and how you can get involved if you're interested in learning more about banding.

I'll add, too, that we will use the term "banding" but this is the same as "ringing," which is the same thing, just another term.

I don't want to keep you waiting, so let's jump in.

Christa: Alright folks I'm really excited to be joined by our guest this week, Holly Garrod. Welcome Holly!

Holly: Hello, Christa, good to be here!

Christa: Thanks for joining me! I first learned about the work that you're doing with the WBBA, and I felt your knowledge and expertise about bird banding would be valuable for our audience. I appreciate you joining us.

Holly: Yea no problem, I'm excited to chat with you about bird banding.

Christa: So before we get started with talking about the WBBA, how are you liking Costa Rica?

Holly: I'm actually loving Costa Rica, the birding is incredible, I can walk up the hill to my house and last weekend, the Big Day weekend, I had 66 species just walking around my house, so the diversity is insane here. And it's such a small country that you can go from coast to coast and things differ, you can go into the highlands and get quetzals and get telemaca endemics, and the coast has a different suite of birds.

Christa: I love it, I can't wait to go there one day myself, too. So, what are you doing at the Costa Rica Bird Observatory?

Holly: So I'm working as the Research Coordinator, and at the Costa Rica Bird Observatory what we do is we do bird monitoring throughout the country of Costa Rica. We have sites throughout the country near the Panama Border, near San Jose, the highlands, the Caribbean coast, and we just started a site in the Osa Peninsula, so we'll be running that this winter. So, while we consistently run our Caribbean and Highlands sites, and others depending on funding, sites

rely on collaborators. Everywhere else we are working with collaborators and NGOs to capacitate bird banding. So, we are helping to bring bird banding around Costa Rica and bring it as a way for monitoring bird populations. We are currently working on a big project with Wood Thrush since their populations are declining. We have a PhD student here from Michigan Tech looking at wintering grounds of Wood Thrush to see how their home range size differs based on fragment size, and we are working with local farmers to get them to protect or set aside some of their land for Wood Thrush conservation. So, we would pay farmers a certain amount of money to incentivize and preserve land for preserving Wood Thrush. With Coronavirus that has made this a little difficult, so we're working on virtual meetups and sending out pamphlets. Usually we would have a BBQ to get people to learn more about Wood Thrush, but that's been difficult lately. Within Costa Rica Bird Observatory, again things are off with Coronavirus. I hire the banders that run our sites for our Highland and Lowland sites. We hire banders on a year-round visa, and you can get a 90-day tourist visa, and after that we get a new round of people. It's a great way for people to band and monitor birds in the tropics and get to know new birds. CRBO has been running for close to 30 years, and we have some good internships, which is cool, part of my job as well has been - I haven't been in the field since March so I've been working on our dataset, and I've been looking at bird bandings, looking at molting, body quality and how it can inform habitat quality especially for migrants. So, I've been looking at the dataset to work on manuscripts, redoing protocols, rewriting maps. It's a nice combination. When we have the bird banders, I'll be in the field with them for a few weeks to train people and get familiar with bird banding in the tropics.

Christa: Talking about Wood Thrush research, that catches my eye because that's the first project I worked on in Southern Indiana looking at how Wood Thrush use habitats, so Wood Thrush have a special place in my heart. My alarm that I wake up to every morning is a Wood Thrush.

Holly: No way, Wood Thrush is the hot species right now. And actually we're working some people in Pennsylvania and they're helping us get some Motus

towers down here so we can see where they're coming from Costa Rica. So yea, Wood Thrush.

Christa: I love your story about how you started birding, and it's cool to hear about the different ways that people get into birding, so I'd love if you'd share your story there.

Holly: Yea, no problem! My story is a little unusual because I did get started at a young age. I grew up in the foothills of Colorado, and my mom used to take me on walks, and I loved seeing birds. But what really sparked my interest was going with my friend birding at Barr Lake and they'd show us birds. My friend hated it, but I loved it, so my friend's dad and myself would make lists and I got hooked. My biggest turning point was when they invited myself and my family down to see the Sandhill crane migration. There were miles of cranes, and since they're biologists they did duck banding. So, I'd go out with them duck banding and we got to put on waders and I got to band my first bird at ten years old, which was a Mallard. It was amazing, too, because they showed us how to sex the ducks and my sister and friend were disgusted, but I was so into it. Since then I was hooked, and I used to go chasing rare birds during high school, and keeping lists, and always birding, and since then that kept me going.

Christa: I just love hearing about the different ways people get started with birding. When you ask someone it's when they're 40 or 50 years old or when they're a kid and they have a spark bird or spark person who introduces them to birding. I love the variety there.

Holly: Yea, it's wonderful too because some people have a species that hooks them, and it's at any age, there's no wrong age to turn to birds.

Christa: That's for sure. Let's get into the WBBA, tell us about the WBBA and how you got involved with them and the kind of work you're doing with them now.

Holly, Yea, so I'm the President of the WBBA, I'll start with my involvement. I got involved with WBBA in 2014. I went to Humboldt State for undergrad and I got

my banding training there, and I did my senior thesis looking at eye color changes, one of the things that stuck out to me was that people were logging eye color but it wasn't noted in the Pyle. And I standardized that to show that eye color changes happen for a lot of different birds. I was then encouraged to present that to the WBBA meeting to present my work, and it's a great community of people. I ended up going to a couple of different meetings, I did my NABC certification with WBBA, and networking and meeting people. It was a fun time to meet other banders. And since I continued to stay involved with them and was asked to be on their board, then later became the Vice President and later the President. It's a cool organization to get involved with. So the biggest thing WBBA does is host annual meetings, that's somewhere in the West, alternating every year in a different state, and it's a great opportunity for bird banders to meet up, do workshops, and present research. It's not too intimidating of a crowd, since everyone is there to learn about birds, and it's a great place to start out. Sometimes people will just present on backyard studies, and others on their PhD so it's an awesome mix of researchers from different calibers. It's not an intimidating scene. We also publish a quarterly journal for the North American Bird Bander. If you have research you want to submit, we encourage you to do that. It helps to connect people who are doing bird banding and research. A lot of times people submit new techniques they discover. There are some people submitting manuscripts or notes, so it's a nice mix to peruse. Those are the main things WBBA does right now. We are also offering more webinars to people, and trying to help create more ways for banders to meet up or share information. Again. Promoting ethical bird banding through social media and other bird banding research. If you tag us in social media, I love to spread what other bird research people are doing.

Christa: Awesome, going back to the connection part too, we just did an episode about how to connect with other birders in the community based on the things other birders told me about, and this is another great way to get involved and connected with the community and other birders in general, and getting on the webinars, and it's not an intimidating space to get to know other people in the community.

Holly: I can say too, just from personal experience, I met a couple from Colorado and now every time I'm back I visit them and we go birding together, so it's a cool way to meet other people and connect.

Christa: I love that. And with the journal submissions, I'll make sure I get that info and post it to our podcast show notes so that if anyone is interested so that anyone can contribute to that and get more info if they have questions.

Holly: That would be wonderful, we are always looking for new submissions.

Christa: With bird banding, can you talk about the importance and utility of bird banding.

Holly: I'll glad you brought that up. Bird banding is this awesome tool to study bird populations. There is a lot of valuable information to get out of banding, and when you have a bird in the hand you can get good demography information, if the bird is molting, you can also see how much fat the bird has stored. You can see how much weight they have. I've caught birds in stopover places and when you catch them you can see how much weight they've gained. It's really cool and it shows you that information you can't get from birdwatching because you need to have a bird in the hand to get this information. You can see ok these birds are gaining a lot of weight so this habitat is important for stopovers. You can use bird banding not only to look at population trends but also where are younger versus older birds moving but also the condition and body quality reflected in the habitats and where the birds are moving through. Another thing is you get great recapture data. These recapture data show they're X years old to show how long some of these birds can live. Wilson's warblers can live around ten years, so they provide such valuable data.

Christa: Do you know how many birds you've personally banded?

Holly: So, I don't have an exact count but I estimate it to be somewhere around 10,000.

Christa: Nice, so when you were talking about banding, you talked about ethical banding. What is that?

Holly: So for ethical banding you need specific training and permits. You need the proper permits to do it legally and the training to do it safely. Banding is a more intensive monitoring technique so you need to know how to take birds out of mist nests, how to band safely, measure safely, and do so efficiently to get birds back into wild. It's like an alien abduction so you want to make it as stress free a possible for the birds. You also want to make sure that you need bird banding. There's some valuable information you can get out of it. But you don't want to do it for the sake of doing it, you want to make sure you have a question and the data you collect gets published or gets put into a larger database or submitted to IBP to study the data. And making sure the data are used properly. Make sure it's Safe for birds, safe for people, and using data to best use possible.

Christa: I think that that's really important for people to understand because people get excited about having a bird in hand but there's so much that goes into it other than handling wildlife.

Holly: Yea, and connect it to birding, not only when you have a bird in the hand it helps spark that interest, and you get to see these details and see them up close and it's a totally different perspective and it's great even as a birder to see a few birds in the hand because you can appreciate that identification even more. Have you banded birds before?

Christa: Yea, so I banded mostly Western Bluebirds and Oregon Vesper Sparrows up north in Washington State. And if you've handled bluebirds before they're just the easiest birds to handle, so, and soon I'll be working on a project banding grackles, so it's two totally different kinds of birds. I've heard grackles are really feisty in hand so it'll be a new experience for me. It's so much fun and such a great learning tools. So, we talked about ethics and what to think about with banding overall, but what qualification do people need and how do people get involved in going to a techniques lab to learn more about it?

Holly: That's a great question. I think the catch 22 is that with jobs want you to have experience but how do you get it. I find it's best to volunteer your time, look into local observatories, universities, and reaching out to people to see if they need help or volunteers. A lot of observatories running constant effort banding can use volunteers and when you're starting out you might not be jumping straight into bird banding sometimes you start out with scribing. Once you get familiar with scribing and data collection you can progress in other skills. There's so much that surrounds it. I've spent months of my life just doing data entry and there's so many aspects to it, to do the fun part of having birds in hand, you have to do the hard part and doing data entry or scribing. Again, too, conferences and webinars help connect people to where you can find resources. The WBBA website is in the process of being revamped but we're hoping to offer some of those resources as well and what projects we're associated with to reach out to. Look at social media accounts too and follow WBBA on Facebook and Instagram. We're also reposting about other people's banding operations. If you are banding, tag us in your projects. We promote volunteer opportunities and jobs, too.

Christa: Perfect, and I know right now it's different because of social distancing and not being able to travel as easily, are there still opportunities for people to learn about banding right now?

Holly: So, the NABC helps to distribute rules and regulations about ethical bird banding and they've released procedures on banding right now. A lot of places aren't taking volunteers right now. People are looking to alternatives and wearing masks, and it will depend on the observatory. Some people are only taking people who have been volunteering in that area for a while, and the chances are even if you can't band right now they might still need help with their social media. Workshops are another great way to get involved. And when you go to a weeklong workshops you'll leave with a great set of skills with bird banding.

Christa: You bring up such a good point about these organizations also needing help with social media and other ways to help out until they have



space for people to come in and learn other techniques. You mentioned before that the WBBA has webinars coming up, and they're important to helping people learn more about bird banding. What are those webinars going to be on?

Holly: The first webinar we did covers introduction to bird banding and how to get involved. The future webinars will be more bird banding specific. The next webinar will be sometime in mid-November, talking about introduction to molt pattern in birds and how molt cycle of the bird works, especially for passerines and song birds since that's what bird banding is focused on. We'd also like to do a workshop in January focusing on aging techniques, so how to use the molt cycle to age birds and other techniques. And so, those are two upcoming webinars, but if people have ideas about what they want to see let us know.

Christa: Perfect, and people can stay up to date on where and when those webinars will be if they follow your Facebook, Instagram, and listserv?

Holly: Yea if you're interested in bird banding definitely become a member but we'll also post that information on our social media accounts. And later that information will go on our website.

Christa: And with the membership, what does a membership with the WBBA look like?

Holly: Right now, you get access to the quarterly journal and you get a reduced rate to come to our conferences. And we'd like to start a member's only page to include access to specific materials or bird banding course materials. Right now the webinars are available to everyone, but we appreciate your membership if you're enjoying the webinars.

Also, someone asked me whether they should report a band if they see a banded bird.

That's a wonderful question, and reporting bands is one of the most important things about bird banding. If you want to report a band, you can google Report a Band to submit it through the USGS. If it's not US based, look up resources

about reporting a band, or look up groups on Facebook to reach out to them and ask them. Everyone loves it when you find their recaptures, and that's the best thing you can do to report recaptures. You can also message WBBA and we'll help you report it as well. That's one of the most important aspects of banding is to see where birds are going.

Christa: Yea I always peek at a bird's legs to see if they're banded.

Holly: I've seen people with those mega lenses and being able to get band numbers off of those. I always check if they're banded, too.

Christa: That's a good point about the lenses and so many people are doing Digi scoping and great ways to get photos or videos of birds. Is there anything you wanted to let people know that I didn't cover?

Holly: Bird banding is a tool that's used to study bird populations and it's not a career or the end all be all of studying birds. There's so many other ways to contribute, like censuses, or submitting your data on eBird. Don't think just because you can't get involved in bird banding, there are so many other ways to get involved with birds. Even when you're running a bird observatory, you still have to think about data management and many other aspects that goes into bird monitoring operations

Christa: That's such a good point Holly, I'm really glad you brought that up too. Thanks so much for coming on and telling us about the WBBA. I for sure follow you and the WBBA on social media and I encourage others to do it too, they post great content on their pages. I appreciate that.

Holly: Thank you so much Christa, that means so much to me. Thank you for having me on this podcast to talk about bird banding.

Christa: Wow, Holly is such a wealth of information and knowledge about bird banding! I hope you've learned a lot of new information and decide to follow Holly and the Western Bird Banding Association on social media or decide to become a member to keep updated on what's going on in the banding world. Now, as Holly mentioned, if you aren't in Western North America, there are



other bird banding associations with which you can get involved and you can still follow and reach out to the WBBA to get connected with the right organization near you.

I'm now a WBBA member and I'm looking forward to the connections and opportunities that's going to afford me in moving forward with my techniques in banding but most importantly establishing a community connection in the banding world.

So there you have it!

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

To access information about the content either me or Holly mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Next week, we are getting into bird speak – specifically, mnemonics and other tools to help us remember those bird sounds

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See you next time.