

Bird Banding Training Course

Studying birds in the Neotropics

In the scope of the avian monitoring program at Un poco del Chocó we are offering a Bird Banding Training Course both to beginners and advanced banders. Our 10-day intensive course is designed for only a small number of participants which allows us to customize our training to the needs of the participants, depending on prior knowledge and skills. Individuals who are new to bird banding will learn the basics of scientific bird banding and avian monitoring techniques, while those who already possess some banding skills will be able to advance their comprehension of molt strategies, and ageing & sexing techniques of birds in the hand.

Avian Research at Un poco del Chocó

Constant-effort mistnetting & Scientific bird banding

Background

Bird banding research is based on the capture-mark-recapture technique. Birds are captured and marked with individually numbered metal bands and subsequently obtained recapture data allows us to study demographical and ecological parameters. Bird banding data helps us to understand the avian life cycle, such as breeding seasons and molt cycles, to study habitat use, and to estimate population sizes, survival and recruitment rates. Color-banding certain bird species with individual color combinations enables us to observe different individuals in the field without the need of recapture, and additional data on largely unknown aspects of the behavioral ecology of tropical bird species can be obtained.

Trying to fill a gap in the research and understanding of the diverse bird life in and around Un poco del Chocó, in August 2014 we started our work as a bird observatory and implemented a longterm-bird monitoring program in the reserve. In order to study the bird populations in the reserve and its surroundings, we run two constant-effort mistnetting sites and catch birds regularly. In the past twelve years we have already banded over 200 different bird species in the reserve. We mainly band passerines and near-passerines, but also hummingbirds, toucans and small raptors.

Methodology

On the banding days, we will open mist nets from approx. 6-11 AM. This means that we will have to be at the banding location 15 minutes earlier to open nets. Once the nets are open, they will be checked every 30 minutes. We will go on net rounds to check for birds, extract them and bring them back to the banding station. Here birds will be banded, measured, and data on breeding and molt status, general fitness (fat, parasites), and age and sex will be taken. Nets will be closed after five hours. After completing three banding days in one location nets will be taken down and will be installed at the next location.

Course structure

Overview

The course will start with an introduction to avian monitoring techniques and scientific bird banding. Participants will learn how to install, open, and close mist nets. On the following banding days participants will learn how to set up and monitor mistnets, extract birds from nets, they will assist in the banding process (band and measure birds) and record data. Several classroom style lectures will be given on ethical bird banding, bird safety, operation of a banding station, ageing and sexing techniques and molt analysis.

During the course, we will catch and band birds at two different locations throughout the reserve for three days each. Furthermore, on one morning we will use a feeder trap to catch hummingbirds and show the specifics of hummingbird banding. We will also demonstrate how to collect samples such as blood, feathers and feces.

Exemplary time schedule*

*For the bird's safety, we can't operate mist nets on rainy days. This means that depending on weather conditions the below given schedule needs to be adjusted.

Day 1	<i>Arrival, lectures</i>
Day 2	<i>Bird Banding Location 1</i>
Day 3	<i>Bird Banding Location 1</i>
Day 4	<i>Hummingbird Banding, lectures</i>
Day 5	<i>Bird watching, Mist net installation</i>
Day 6	<i>Bird Banding Location 2</i>
Day 7	<i>Bird Banding Location 2</i>
Day 8	<i>Bird Banding Location 3</i>
Day 9	<i>Bird Banding Location 3</i>
Day 10	<i>Final Evaluation, Departure</i>

A detailed course syllabus and study materials will be provided upon successful application.

Banding Training

Course instructor Nicole Büttner is currently conducting her PhD research on avian life cycle phenology in the reserve. She is a certified bird banding trainer of the North American Banding Council (NABC) and teaches according to their ethics and high standards in bird banding.

All lectures will be held in English. The practical work will furthermore be supported by NABC bander Christian Montalvo and our banding assistant Leo Montalvo who both mainly speak Spanish.

This course allows participants to get an insight to most banding techniques, though it will take more time and experience than this course can provide to fully learn and dominate all banding skills. However, participants will get to know a variety of tropical bird species and will learn how to extract a bird from a mist net, how to measure it, how to band it, and how to assess ecological and demographical data. To allow enough time for teaching without stressing the birds, we generally operate 16 mistnets. The number of birds a participant will handle depends on capture rates, the type of birds we catch, prior knowledge and skills etc. For example, some birds can get tangled heavily, so they will not be extracted by beginners.

Although this course doesn't provide any banding certification or license, we will issue a certificate confirming participation in our bird banding training program.

Training process

For beginners

The order of training during the program will be as follows (adapted from The Instructor's guide to training passerine bird banders in North America).

1. On the first banding day, the participant primarily acts in an "observer" role while all the various elements of the banding procedure (including basic record keeping, ethics, and bird safety) are explained. The participant records the data and assists in setting, opening, and closing nets. As an introduction to the "hands-on" part of banding, the participant may be given a few birds in the Bander's grip for release.
2. The participant must begin by mastering bird handling and the Bander's Grip. At this stage, the practical rudiments of ageing, sexing, and measuring are introduced, together with practice transferring a bird from hand to hand and from person to person. The participant also becomes familiar with placing birds in bird bags and removing them from the bags. As a prelude to one method of extracting from mist nets, the photographer's grip is introduced and mastered.
3. For passerine banding, when it is evident that participants are comfortable handling birds, they may begin to learn simple techniques for extraction from mist nets. First, we will demonstrate bird removal with a couple of birds. We will select relatively untangled, quiet birds as a start and then progressively work up to more difficult situations. Through this entire initial training period, we personally oversee all of the participant's bandings and extractions. As skills develop, the participant is permitted to take on more and more solo responsibilities but is cautioned constantly to contact the banding team immediately should any difficulties arise. As a general guide, the participant is cautioned not to begin extracting a bird if any uncertainty exists as to how it entered the net. We will decide how much time we will give the participant to extract the bird, as he or she encounters difficulties.
4. After a few days, the participant should be capable of banding small birds, followed by learning to extract small birds from nets. Larger birds can be attempted when they are caught.

5. Supplementary techniques such as sexing and ageing birds or molt assessment will be taught once the basic skills are mastered. At this point, the participant should read the provided study material at least one more time.

For advanced participants

Participants with prior bird banding experience will complete a self-evaluation to identify gaps in knowledge and their practical banding skills will be assessed by our banding team during the first two banding days. We will then be able to individualize banding training and will work together with the participants on fine-tuning their skills.

Rates and Dates 2026

The costs for the course are **1250 US\$** and include three meals per day & lodging in dormitory-style rooms at the biological station, all equipment, and taxes.

Furthermore the proceeds of our course help us finance our research projects, conservation work and scholarships for Ecuadorian students!

Course dates

June 03 - 12

Application deadline

May 4

Payment deadline

May 15

Spots are limited; therefore, priority will be given to those who apply earliest!

Once accepted to the course, we will hold the spots until the payment deadline. If we don't receive payments by those dates, we will invite people on our waiting list.

Scholarships

Depending on the number of participants we will be able to provide discounted rates for Ecuadorian students. Successful scholarship applicants should be proficient in English and detail how this course is relevant to their future career.