

History Of The Leg Band

Originally used to trace the movements of wild birds, leg bands today are used to identify a pet bird's origins

By Dick Schroeder

A leg band can help to identify a lost bird. Courtesy Jennifer Weryzynski, New Jersey

In America, John James Audubon tied silver cords to the legs of a clutch of Eastern phoebes in 1803 near Philadelphia. He identified the birds when they returned to that area the following year.

Hans Christian Mortesen, a schoolteacher from Denmark, received credit for working out the first system for bird banding. He began in 1899 with 165 young starlings that were banded with numbered bands that contained his address. Mortesen hoped that if the birds were found, he would be contacted and the bands — or rings as they are called in Europe — would be returned to him. The experiment was a great success, and it attracted other countries to follow suit after Mortesen published his results.

In 1902, Paul Barish, an aide at the National Museum, started the first scientific banding system in North America. He banded about 100 black-crowned night herons around Washington, D.C. Their bands simply stated "Return to Smithsonian Institution." One of his banded night-herons was found dead in Cuba two years later, a record for a banded bird at that time.

The North American who really got banding going in the United States and Canada was Jack Miner. He established a waterfowl sanctuary near Kingsville, Ontario, Canada. Between 1909 and 1930, he banded 20,000 Canadian geese. Hunters returned many of the bands.

As more North Americans became involved in banding, they realized the need for a central information center. In 1911, the American Bird Banding Association began collecting data. By 1920, it had grown too large to be coordinated by a private group and was taken over by the U.S. Geological Survey, where it remains today.

Parrot Leg Bands

You might think, "Fine, but what does this have to do with the band on the leg of my pet Amazon parrot?" While the banding of wild birds enables scientists to ID an individual bird and, in many cases, tell where the bird originated, the band on your pet bird might enable you to do the likewise.

Decoding The Leg Band

Find out how to read the information on your bird's leg band. [Click Here>>](#)

All parrots imported into the United States prior to the Wild Bird Conservation Act, which pretty much closed the country to the importation of parrots, received bands while they were in a USDA-approved quarantine station. These stainless-steel bands were usually round in section. It required special tools to affix the bands to the birds' legs. If you own a bird with such a band, it indicates that it was imported into the U.S. rather than captive-bred here. Most captive-bred parrots have closed bands, usually made of aluminum, but sometimes stainless steel — especially for larger species with stronger beaks.

We need to look at why we began banding imported birds in the first place. In the early 1900s, there were no restrictions on importing birds into the United States. Then the pandemic psittacosis swept the country in 1929, and it was blamed on wild-caught parrots imported for the Christmas pet trade. Importation stopped and didn't resume until 1967, with a limited ban in place. That was removed in 1973. Parrots, by the way, are the only birds required to be banded in quarantine. Some states require all incoming birds to have a closed band. How well this is enforced is anyone's guess, as that would require an inspector at the airport to monitor shipments.

After the psittacosis pandemic of 1929, California, Colorado and Connecticut passed laws requiring that all parakeets (budgies) in their states be closed-banded. Budgie breeders registered with the state and issued coded leg bands to be placed on the hatchlings. The breeder's ID code, the year and an ID number for the bird appeared on each band.