

Banding the Tatton

By TJ Fox, certified Texas Master Naturalist

A Quiz for Master Naturalists:

What is a “Funnel” trap?

What is a “MODO”?

What does “HY” signify?

What is the meaning of “AHY”?

What is a molt number?

The answers are at the end of this article, but no peeking.

The headlights of a truck splashed across me in the early morning darkness. I hoped it was Ray Kirkwood so we could be on our way. It was already 6:10 am and would soon be light. We had just under 20 miles to travel before we could begin our day. Our route would take us north from Rockport across Copano Bay to the Tatton Unit of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The Tatton Unit covers some 7568 acres of grass land and mesquite woodlands along HWY 35 about 11 miles north of Copano Bay. Thus began another day of dove banding on the Tatton.

For the second year, Ray and I have banded mourning doves under the direction of Chad Stinson, Biologist at ANWR. The data we collected will help Texas Parks and Wildlife assess the status of the dove population in Texas. This year’s survey began about mid-July and concluded at the end of August. We spent three days a week at the effort, with each banding session lasting about six hours.

Chad and his co-workers had established eleven trap sites on the Tatton Unit adjacent to pasture roads so they could be easily accessed by truck. Many of the sites were pre-baited using solar-powered deer feeders, which spread seed periodically for about a month prior to the banding season. The traps were fabricated at ANWR from welded wire mesh. Each trap is a box about two feet square and six inches high with no bottom. A “trapdoor” with wire latch allows access to the trap. The birds enter the trap through two “funnels.” Once inside it is difficult—though not impossible—for the bird to escape. At each site, traps were placed on an area of bare ground.



Our days started just before sunrise when we reached the first trap site, T-50, about one-half mile off the highway. This site had eight traps—a group of four, a group of three, and a single trap by itself. There are no rules concerning trap lay-out. Whatever works! Traps had been left open side up to prevent a bird being trapped during our absence. We first turned the traps over

and placed them side by side. Once the traps were arranged, we spread a generous amount of millet seed inside each trap. We're careful not to spill any outside the traps. No "free lunches" here!

It required about an hour to cover the four-plus miles and set almost 50 traps at the eleven trap sites. After baiting the traps, we took time for a quick breakfast. We usually allowed the birds about an hour and twenty minutes to find their own breakfast before we started the first run.

Here's how one day developed:

We begin our first run of the day after baiting all the traps. We drive slowly to within about 60 feet of the traps on site T-50. Last year, this site was our most productive, with a stock tank nearby and ample tree cover for the birds. This year the tank is dry with a hard-crust bottom, so our capture rate has been up and down. We can see birds all around the traps, and we watch as two birds move up to the funnel-shaped doorway and actually enter its mouth, but never completely enter the trap. After 10 frustrating minutes we leave quietly with no birds banded. The other 10 trap sites yield five birds on that first run. Then a quick trip to the convenience store on the north side of Copano Bay for caffeine and we're ready for our second run of the morning.

Once again we approach site T-50. This time as we reach the site, Ray says, "Bird in the trap"... followed by "No, three birds in the traps"... followed by "No, six birds". As it turns out we had SEVEN birds to band.

By now we have eliminated any wasted motion from our banding routine. We first block the two "funnels" on each occupied trap. On two previous occasions, we watched in frustration as birds escaped before we could stop them. It's my job to grab the laundry bag where we keep several 4X4 wood blocks used to block the doorways. Ray grabs the bird-carry bag and his arm guard (TJ Fox, pat. pend.). The birds are generally quiet and content to feed until we arrive and approach the traps. Then all hell breaks loose. After we block the traps, we need to extract the birds as quickly as possible so they won't injure themselves. Ray slowly reaches into the trap (the trapdoor edges are very sharp and the arm guard keeps Ray from bleeding on the doves) and extracts a bird and places it in the carry-sack I'm holding.



One by one we extract the birds. Finally, Ray carries the last one to the truck and I bring the others in the carry-bag. Once Ray is in the truck, I pass the bag to him and we close the doors. We did have a bird get loose on one occasion. Ray is fairly limber for an old guy, and it was interesting, watching him climbing over the front seat into the back to recapture the bird.

Now we get to the important part. First, Ray determines if the bird is a “recapture” (already has a leg band). If not, I remove a band from the container, check to see that it’s the next consecutive number, and spread it open using special banding pliers. When the band is open and placed in the pliers, Ray holds the bird with its leg extended and I position the open band around the leg and crimp it closed.



Record-keeping is next. I record the band number, site number, and date and time. Ray now gives me age information and the number of the most recently molted primary flight feather. Age information is determined by looking at primary covert feathers. Young “hatch-year” mourning doves have light-colored or buffy tips on their primary coverts. Primary flight feathers that come in after a molt are darker and cleaner, and the newest feather is often shorter than the old, unmolted feathers. If the bird is a recapture, we record the existing band number.



The bird in the picture is an AHY 4.

We’re finished, and the bird is released. We processed our seven-bird capture in nine minutes. Although we had no more than two birds at any one location for the rest of the morning, we did band 20 birds that day.

Finally, the project made us feel bipolar. When you’re thinking about going, you hate it. Why does TPWD need to have this done during the hottest part of the year? Because it’s so hot, you have to get up in the middle of the night to start early when it’s cooler so we won’t stress the birds. What about OUR stress? We use Ray’s truck and cover over 80 miles on each session. During that time we open and close gates at least 10 times (that’s my job) and exit the truck at least 40 times. Each time we get down from Ray’s tall truck, we must, of course, climb back in. In addition,

there’s lots of kneeling down on one knee and then standing back up. That’s not always easy for older backs and knees.

However, once “on the job,” especially if it’s a good day, you forget all the bad stuff and just have a great experience. We flushed 12 wood storks from the last remaining pond one morning. (Now that pond is dry.) We saw lots of scissor-tail flycatchers minus their scissor-tails, plus many deer, and, on two occasions, we saw bobcats unconcerned with our presence.



A bobcat watches the trap for us.

Last year Ray and I banded about 60 birds. This year, we banded 214 birds with an additional 26 recaptures while spending about 200 hours and driving over 1200 miles. A good day last year was 5 or 6 birds. This year we averaged banding 15 doves each day, with one day of 30 and another of 26. On two occasions, we had seven birds at one site at one time. We are already looking forward to banding the Tatton next year. Almost.

Quiz Answers:

A Funnel Trap is a bird trap designed with a funnel-shaped entry.

An "MODO" is shorthand for Mourning Dove.

"HY" signifies a hatch-year (less than one year old) bird.

"AHY" designates After-Hatch Year—a bird more than one year old

Molt Number indicates the last primary flight feather that has been molted.