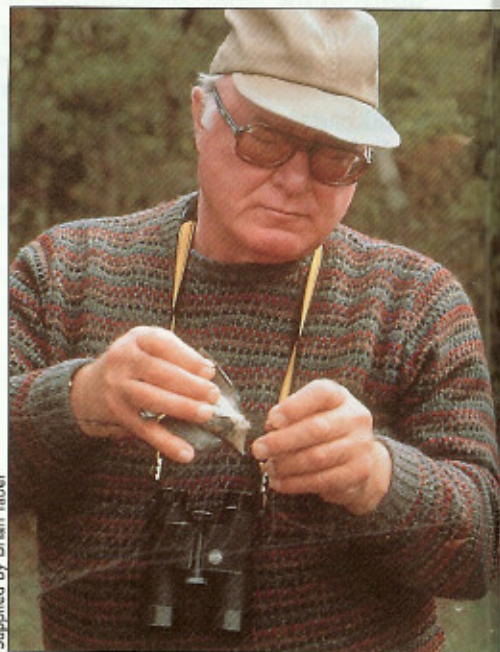




On a Wing and a Prayer



Supplied by Brian Taber

Above: Fred Scott carefully releases a songbird from a mist net, which is used to capture birds while in flight without harming them. Left: The black-throated green warbler is just one of the migrating songbirds captured so data can be gathered about their health and migrating behaviors.

by Brian Taber

In fall 1962, Fred Scott recognized that the area around the Kiptopeke Ferry dock, at the tip of Virginia's Eastern Shore, was a special place for migrating birds. It appeared that the narrowing peninsula funneled southbound birds into an ever-tighter space just before the

land ended at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The highly-concentrated birds often landed and rested in the area for days before continuing the long journey to the wintering grounds. The following year, together with Mike and Dorothy Mitchell, Charlie Hacker and Walter and Doris Smith, Fred established what would become an annual station to examine and band songbirds.

On a typical morning at the station, around sunrise, the volunteers would unfurl the 2-meter high, 12-meter long, fine-mesh nets, known as "mist nets," that they had rolled up the previous afternoon. They would then return to their lawn chairs and card tables and wait for a while, then quietly walk the net lanes and carefully extract any birds that had become entangled. The birds were put in bags or in hand-made screened, wooden bird boxes and carried back to be examined.

Sometimes using magnifying glasses to see tiny details, the volunteers would determine the species, the sex and the fat content, or "migration fuel." To determine the age, sometimes even the minute lines in the skull had to be observed. An aluminum U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band was expertly placed around the leg, with a unique identifying number, in case the bird was later recovered by them or by other stations. The work was supported in

*The founding
volunteers of the
Kiptopeke Songbird
Banding Station
celebrate 40 years
of conservation
excellence.*

a businessman, engaged in many endeavors, and he worked as a technical writer. He was a patron of the arts in Richmond. He was active in the breeding bird forays of the VSO. He was an editor for *American Birds* magazine and was editor emeritus of *The Raven*, the journal of the VSO. He also pioneered Bald Eagle Flight Surveys. Fred passed away in April 2001.

Charlie Hacker was an Iowa native, who graduated from Iowa State University and fulfilled a career at Newport News Shipbuilding. He retired as assistant department head of



Supplied by Brian Taber



Supplied by Brian Taber

Dorothy Mitchell (above) and her late husband Mike (right) volunteered much of their free time to banding songbirds and teaching others about these fascinating creatures.



Supplied by Brian Taber

Above: Charlie Hacker, one of the original founding members of the Kiptopeke Songbird Banding Station, also helped with studies on ospreys and a program to help reintroduce peregrine falcons back to Virginia.

part by the Virginia Society of Ornithology (VSO) and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, but mainly the dedicated volunteers handled the expenses.

The information from these many years of study tells the story of the increase, or all-too-often, the decrease in the numbers of various species. Habitat loss in Central, North and South America has taken a heavy toll on migratory birds.

But who were these founding volunteers? Fred Scott was a graduate of Hampden Sydney College and the University of Michigan. He was

hull design. In addition to being an active York Ruritan Club member, church member and Bible class teacher in Hampton, Charlie found time to be president of the Hampton Roads Bird Club and the VSO. During his retirement, he worked with Dr. Mitchell Byrd, at the College of William and Mary, studying ospreys and participating in the Peregrine Falcon Reintroduction Program. Charlie passed away in February 2003.

Walter Smith attended the Newport News Apprentice School, then also worked at the Newport News

Shipbuilding, retiring as a supervisor. He and his wife Doris became involved at Kiptopeke, and in addition to songbird banding, they made wooden bird holding boxes and transcribed a huge amount of data. Walter kept a detailed journal of his activities and the entries are a great pleasure to read. Today Walter and Doris continue to visit Kiptopeke as often as their time and health allow.

Sydney "Mike" Mitchell was the third member of the "Kiptopeke Founder's" team to work at the shipyard. He was a draftsman there. Illustrative of his dedication to a cause, he was a Boy Scout master for an amazing 62 years. He founded the Hampton Roads Bird Club and was its first president. Dorothy, his wife, was just as taken with bird study and together they not only helped at Kiptopeke, but they banded birds in their yard in Newport News. Dorothy's book *All About Birds*, is filled with anecdotes and wonderful photos of their banding experiences and was dedicated to Mike, who passed away in October 1989. Dorothy still regularly visits Kiptopeke and at the annual Birding Festival, sets up an outdoor display table, full of bird-related treasures. She has given bird and nature talks to thousands of school children.

Now, 40 years, hundreds of volunteers and almost a third of a million banded birds later, the songbird station is still in operation. It is second in seniority only to Long Point Bird Observatory, run by Bird Studies Canada, in Ontario, which opened in 1960. The station is now inside Kiptopeke State Park, which was established in 1992 thanks to the "Founders" and others who wrote letters, attended meetings and made



Supplied by Brian Taber



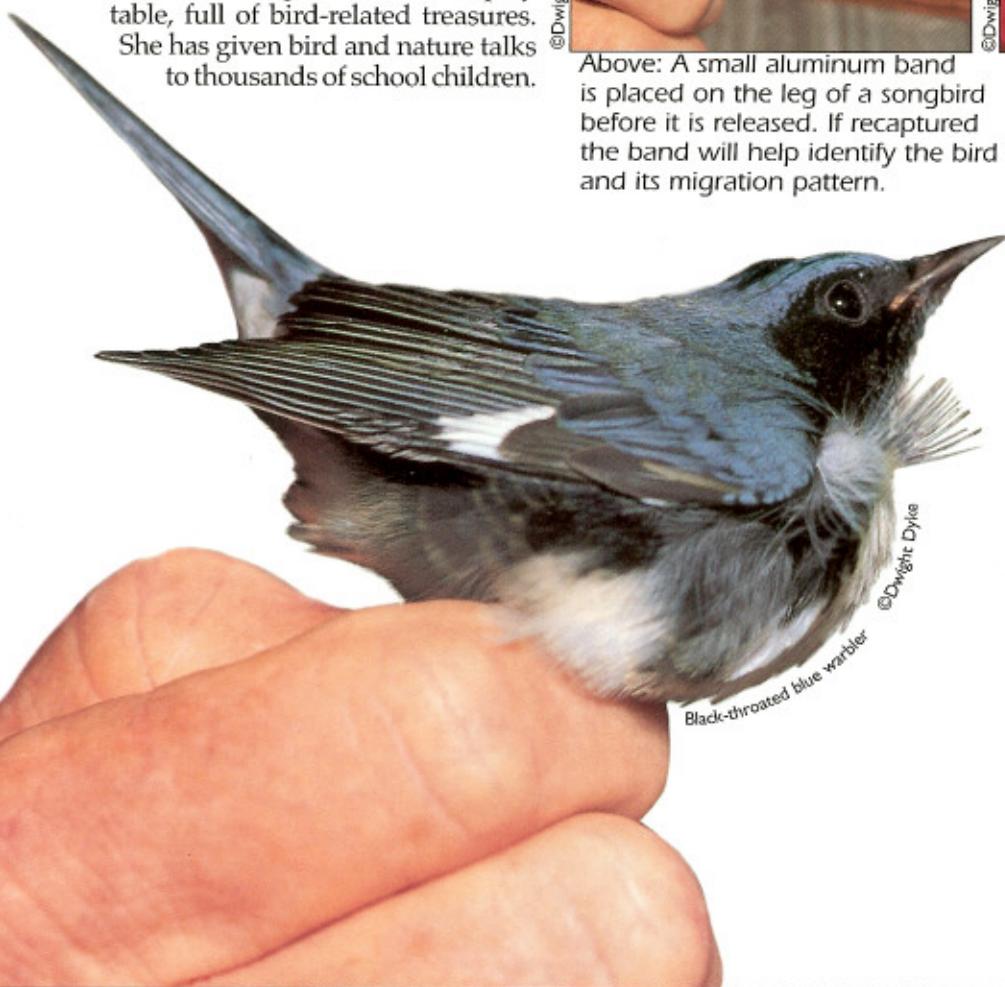
©Dwight Dyke

Above: A small aluminum band is placed on the leg of a songbird before it is released. If recaptured the band will help identify the bird and its migration pattern.



©Dwight Dyke

Above: Doris Smith, who loves to give nature talks, and her husband Walter continue to visit Kiptopeke and help to educate people about the important work that is being accomplished there.



©Dwight Dyke

Black-throated blue warbler

telephone calls to insure that the area would be preserved for the birds and their study.

A granite marker and inscribed plaque was dedicated at Kiptopeke in October 2002 to the "Founders," in conjunction with the 10th Annual Eastern Shore Birding Festival, an event which surely would not exist, but for the efforts of the early volunteers. At the opening night session of the Festival, Betty Scott, Fred's wife, Walter and Doris Smith and Dorothy Mitchell were honored with an emotional standing ovation for their vision and dedication. The "Kiptopeke Founder's Fund" was estab-

lished in July 2003 by Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory as a way to preserve the legacy of the founding volunteers and insure that such studies and environmental education will continue for many years to come.

The Observatory, a non-profit organization established in 1994, now operates the fall songbird station, with seasonal biologists and volunteers, who still quietly walk the nets

and carefully extract the birds. The banding permit is provided through Dr. Bryan Watts and Dr. Mitchell Byrd, of the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary. Inspired by the fall research, the Observatory now also conducts songbird banding in the spring, three miles south of Kiptopeke, at the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. Refuge Manager, Sue Rice and Kip-

topeke State Park Superintendent Dave Summers know the value of long-term scientific research and on-site environmental education, and are supportive of the efforts to understand wildlife needs and protect vital habitats. □

Brian Taber is a graduate of The College of William & Mary and current president of CVWO. He has authored articles on birds in popular and scientific publications, and recently appeared in the book "Window on the Chesapeake," by Wendy Clark. Brian has also traveled doing bird studies throughout the United States, Costa Rica, Mexico, Canada, England and Wales.

CVWO

The Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory is a member-based organization that relies mainly on dues, other donations, fund-raising events and limited grant funding to operate its programs. To learn more about the Observatory, visit the Web site at www.cvwo.org. To learn about volunteer opportunities, to become a member or to make a special, tax-deductible donation to the "Kiptopeke Founder's Fund," write to CVWO, P.O. Box 912, Eastville, VA 23347.



Doris and Walter Smith, along with Dorothy Mitchell, were honored at a dedication for the "Founders" at Kiptopeke on October 2002 during the Eastern Shore Birding Festival.

