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# THE BANDS THAT BIND US

A story of friendship, loss and the unexpected

by CHRIS A. NICOLAI



**B**lack brant are one of the most studied birds in the world, in part because we've been trying to get answers to questions about this beautiful sea goose species, but also because Dr. Jim Sedinger of the University of Nevada, Reno, started an intensive and long-term brant banding program on the Yukon Delta in Alaska in 1984.

Each summer, researchers and technicians set up camp on the Yukon Delta and begin extensive monitoring of the geese and their nests. When eggs are close to hatching, researchers break through the shells just enough to clamp a small metal tag on the webbing of one of the gosling's feet. Later, goslings are rounded up before they can fly, and fitted with the aluminum leg bands hunters are used to seeing, as well as plastic three-character leg bands that can be read easily with a spotting scope. The same brant come back to the same place year after year to nest and rear their young. Many researchers travel with the birds during hunting season to monitor them from the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge on the Alaskan Peninsula to San Ignacio Bay in Baja California Sur, Mexico.

When you have researchers who work that intensively in remote places over that many years, it forms a small but tightly knit community. While members of that

community disperse widely each year, their bonds are intense.

I met Marnie Shepherd when she joined this community working as a technician in Alaska in 1998 when she was 21 years old. I was at an area south of the Tutakoke River brant colony, and she was at another brant colony called Kigigak Island, about 40 miles south of me, but there was no supervisor there for the first month and nothing but brand new technicians. I spent many hours on the radio talking with her in the evenings about what she was seeing in regards to birds and nesting.

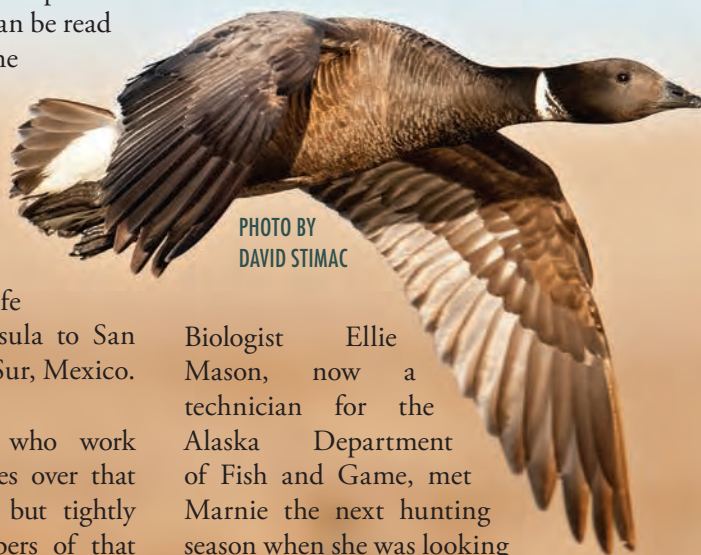


PHOTO BY  
DAVID STIMAC

Biologist Ellie Mason, now a technician for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, met Marnie the next hunting season when she was looking

Researchers at brant colonies in Alaska keep detailed records of brant nests and goslings.  
PHOTO BY  
DAVID STIMAC

## BRANT RESEARCH

The Tutakoke (too-TAH-coke) River brant colony study is led by the University of Nevada, Reno, which has facilitated projects with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Canadian Wildlife Service, several state agencies, University of Alaska Fairbanks and Humboldt State University.

The colony has been studied since the 1950s, but the intense color banding effort was started in 1984 by Dr. Jim Sedinger when he was with USFWS, then moved to the University of Alaska Fairbanks, then to UNR, where it remains to this day. Sedinger will retire soon, and the program will be handed over to Mark Lindberg at UAF.



Research camp at the Tutakoke River brant colony. PHOTO BY DAVID STIMAC



Marnie Shepherd



Marnie Shepherd measuring brant bagged by hunters in San Quintin, Mexico.

to hire a camp leader for the brant research camp in San Quintin, on the Pacific Coast of Baja California about four hours south of the border.

Marnie had only applied for a tech position, but she got the job. “She was a little nervous about it, but she stepped right up,” Mason said. “One of the best decisions we ever made was hiring her for that position.”

Marnie became part of the local community, so much so that she bought a house there with some friends from Alaska, even though she lived in Mexico for only half the year. She became friends with Sergio Duarte, whose family would have her over for Christmas. Marnie called them her adopted family.

“She really helped make that bridge between the science of the project and helping people understand what we were doing down there. That’s huge in a small town in another country,” Mason said.

It had practical value as well. “If our boats broke down, they were right there to help us,” she said. “You really need that. It’s hard to get stuff done when you’re a single white woman in Mexico.”

Phil Jebbia, who lives in Huntington Beach and hunts in San Quintin several weekends a year, met Marnie in 1999. He said the hunters looked forward to seeing her big smile



Marnie Shepherd with her “adopted” San Quintin family, the Duartes – from left to right, Orlando Duarte (who is now 20), Rolando Duarte, David Duarte, Josue Duarte, Josue Duarte Jr. and Sergio Duarte. PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLIE MASON

at the boat ramp. “How’d you do?” she’d ask, then she’d check out their birds, recording bands and webtags, weighing the birds, taking wing measurements, checking their gender, and adding all of it to the growing body of detailed data on this species.

The locals in San Quintin called her “Marina.”

Then in February 2006, when she was 29, she died unexpectedly. Her community – her family, the brant researchers, the locals in San Quintin – was engulfed in shock and grief that can still be felt to this day.

**W**hat can you do when something like this happens? It’s a question that bedevils everyone who faces a loss that cannot be reversed.

Some of the locals in San Quintin made a memorial bench and built a rock garden near where she died.

Phil’s reaction was to memorialize Marnie by contributing to brant conservation: He made a contribution to help purchase plastic leg bands for the 2007 research season – something he still does each year.

In the summer of 2007, I prepared the first 1,200 bands supported by Phil and led the crew that affixed them to brant in the Tutakoke River colony, and a portion of them happened to be black bands that started with a heart symbol followed by two other characters. Though many other types of bands have been purchased with Phil’s subsequent contributions – you can have only 576 that start with a heart – these are the ones people know as “Marnie bands” – the black symbolizing loss and the heart symbolizing love. In San Quintin, the locals call them “Marina bands.”

Since then, dozens of these Marnie-banded birds have been spotted by researchers or bird watchers, or killed by hunters, and over a dozen scientific papers using banded-brant data have been published with the “in memory of Marnie” included in the acknowledgements.





Marnie Shepherd gives colleague Dan Rizzolo a piggyback ride.

Phil, along with his wife and two daughters, remains an avid brant hunter, and he frequently calls me with updates about San Quintin brant numbers and how fat the new crop of brant may be.

On Feb. 20, 2009, Phil and his wife each shot a brant with a Marnie band in San Quintin. Again on Feb. 24, 2012, they got another pair of Marnie bands.

Getting a banded brant is not entirely unusual because it is an intensively banded species. But getting Marnie bands? They know it sounds crazy, but it felt like their friend was saying hello.

In 2009, wildlife photographer Dave Stimac visited the Tutakoke River brant camp for the first time.

“Waterfowl are my passion and I was thrilled at the prospect of photographing brant and many other species at one of the greatest waterbird nesting areas in the world,” he said. He arrived on May 3 to find a wintry landscape with few birds. But that changed quickly. New birds arrived every day, and within six days, several large flocks of brant came in off the Bering Sea and settled in on the snow-covered tundra.

For the next five weeks, he spent nearly every day photographing loons, geese, ducks and shorebirds. On May 22, the crew found the first brant nests of the season.

“It wasn’t unusual to find banded birds in the area, given the longevity of this study, and I photographed as many of them as I could,” he said.

One of the birds he photographed that day had a Marnie band – the bird you see on the cover of this magazine. “I was just happy to get a sharp, well-lit image,” Dave said.

He returned to the colony for the next two summers to photograph waterfowl and the activities of waterfowl biologists, creating a large body of work that documented all facets of research there.

Dave often donates his photos to a fundraising dinner I do in Nevada each year, the Nevada Waterfowl Association Wood Duck Dinner. In 2014, I was going through his images from Tutakoke to pick some framable images for donation items, and I found that bird with the Marnie band, ♥SA. The bird in that photo has been a regular annual breeder at Tutakoke since it was banded in 2007, an integral part of that community of birds, researchers and hunters. I asked if I could get a copy of that photo enlarged, and he said yes.

On a whim, I got it printed and framed up nice and sent it to Phil. He called me within moments of opening it.

“It was such a thoughtful thing for Chris to do, as he knows my passion for the little sea geese and my feelings for Marnie,” Phil said. “It’s hanging above my desk in my office in South Pasadena, so I can be reminded daily.”

This year on Feb. 22, I got a voicemail from Phil. He sounded really emotional. I had a feeling it was about a recent trip to San Quintin.

The photo Chris Nicolai gave to Phil Jebbia.  
PHOTO BY DAVID STIMAC



He called again a few minutes later and I knew I had to take his call. Sure enough, he had been hunting in San Quintin the weekend before, and had shot another black heart band – his family's fifth.

Phil had been hunting with his wife from first light to 9:30 a.m., but while a lot of geese were traversing San Quintin Bay, they weren't getting any shots where they were. Their guide, Rolando Duarte – the nephew of Marnie's friend Sergio – picked them up and moved them to the middle of the bay. It was slow, but they managed to bag four geese before the guide came back for them.

"I told him it was time to head for the boat ramp," Phil said. "We were happy with our hunt – the previous two days had been very satisfying." But Rolando insisted that there was another area he wanted to try for about one more hour, the rock blind known as Pedregal.

The brant weren't responding to the decoy spread. After about 45 minutes, a flock of about 15 geese flew by at about 75 yards. "To our amazement, two in the group made a hard turn and came right into the decoys."

Phil and his wife each got one, and when Rolando picked them up, he yelled that Phil's had a Marnie band. "We were excited to end our hunt with Marnie again saying 'hello' to us," Phil said.

Then when he went into his office two days after returning from Mexico, he realized it was the same brant that was in Dave's photo. He had been hunting not far from where Marnie died.

Phil can't shake the feeling that Marnie was saying something, or maybe telling him there was something he's supposed to do. To this day, he said, "the hair stands up on my arms every time I think about it."

I couldn't believe it.

Shooting a banded brant is not a big deal. Having a great photo of a banded brant is not a big deal either, as many photographers send us photos each winter of birds they've sighted to include in our database. But still, hunters shoot less than 3 percent of the brant we band each year, and there are only a few hundred photos of banded birds taken each year.

To shoot a bird wearing a band you contributed in someone's memory is rare. To have shot a bird that has been photographed is even more rare. To shoot the one that you have a photo of in your office is virtually impossible.



Researchers put tags on goslings before they leave their shells.  
PHOTO BY DAVID STIMAC

## "MARNIE BAND" BRANT

Researchers marked 502 brant with Marnie Bands in 2007. Here's what happened with those birds:

<b>216</b> of their nests were monitored	<b>95</b> were recaptured at Tutakoke	<b>27</b> were sighted in Canada
<b>36</b> were sighted in Mexico	<b>33</b> were recovered by hunters (including five by Phil Jebbia – who paid for the bands – and his wife, Gayle)	
<b>2</b> were photographed by Dave Stimac		





Nothing will ever replace our friend. But Phil's Marnie bands bring us connection, joy and tears, and keep us grateful to have Marnie's memory in our hearts. 🐾

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Nicolai is a migratory bird biologist for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, based in Reno, Nevada. He earned his doctorate in 2010 at the University of Nevada Reno.

## ABOUT ♥SA

- Male banded July 19, 2007, as an adult; his mate was a female who had been banded as an adult in 2000
- Spotted in 2008 with his mate at the Tutakoke River brant colony
- Spotted in 2009 at a nest with his mate at Tutakoke – four goslings fledged – and photographed by Dave Stimac
- Captured in 2011 with his mate, measurements taken – he was big!
- Spotted in 2012 at a nest with his mate – five goslings fledged
- Spotted at camp in 2013. His mate was seen there as well, but researchers could not confirm whether they had a nest that year.

Data courtesy of Thomas Riecke, doctoral student at University of Nevada, Reno.