

Identification of Individual Birds in Exhibition Poultry

By Rich Barczewski (May, 2024)

Depending upon the size of your flock, you may find it necessary to mark your individual birds in some unique way for various reasons. Some folks want to be able to track their birds for genetic purposes, others may find it useful to keep track of birds for age, while still others may want to be able to mark and record where specific birds have originated from. Regardless of the reason, being able to identify a bird permanently is a useful tool for many poultry breeders.

Over the years, I've often purchased birds that lacked any type of identifying feature. Oftentimes, the only thing I knew at the time of the purchase was where the bird was coming from and its approximate age. While this may be helpful in and of itself, if not recorded in some fashion, and the bird marked in some fashion, this information may quickly be forgotten. For that reason, relying on some type of permanent marking may be an appropriate action to consider.

Now, with poultry, the United States Department of Agriculture may require that your birds be identified for the purpose of testing, or for interstate transportation. So, what are the options available to poultry keepers to identify their birds? Actually, there are several different methods available that can be utilized, some for permanent identification and still others that provide identification for the short run.

If you are interested in marking birds for short term identification, the options can include using **SPIRAL BANDS, OR ZIP TIES (FIG. 1)**. There are some concerns about these two methods because problems can occur with them tightening, over time, on the leg of the birds, but for a short-term marking, they are relatively cheap (8 to 11 cents per band) and spiral bands can be removed and reused if you so desire. Zip ties come in various sizes and the shorter ones (4 or 8 inches in length) run between 8 and 10 cents each. Like spiral bands, they are available in a multitude of colors and can be easily removed (however they cannot be reused).

Why might you use either zip ties or spiral bands? One reason to use these identification methods is to identify birds that originated from a specific mating. If you end up utilizing some type of permanent mark, these bands can be removed when the permanent identification is put in place. Regardless, if you use either zip ties or spiral band it is important to always observe your birds closely and if you notice a bird limping or showing some signs of leg distress, it will need to be caught to make sure the bands are not causing the problem, especially if they were placed on the leg too tightly or if they were placed when the bird was young and before it grew to mature size. Caught early, any band can be removed and the bird will make a full recovery in the matter of a week or so.

That brings us to the methods of individual marking. One common type of individual marking method is the use of **NUMBERED BANDETTES (FIG. 2)**. These bandettes are plastic, come in several sizes and colors and are available with numbers pre-printed on them. General costs vary between 22 and 60 cents per band, however, you need to be aware that the numbers may wear off over time, depending upon the environment where your birds are housed. If used on waterfowl that have access to swimming waters, they will wear off faster. In my own personal experience, the numbers will last a year or two under most circumstances with waterfowl and with chickens, usually much longer.

Better alternatives would be **ALUMINUM OR STEEL, BUTT END BANDS (FIG. 2)** at a cost of 25 to 30 cents or more depending upon the size. In some cases, butt end bands can be applied with a pair of pliers, or if you use a lot of a particular size, there are special application pliers that can be purchased for that purpose. Some of the aluminum bands are also available in various colors. Most of these band types have numbers printed on them.

Another option might be **ADJUSTABLE ALUMINUM BANDS (FIG. 3)** that can be permanently sealed onto the leg of your bird. These bands are straight pieces of aluminum with an identification number pressed into them. They have several holes along their length to allow them to be used on various size legs, and an applicator tool is required to permanently close the band onto the leg of the bird. While these bands are relatively cheap at 10 cents each, the application tool runs about \$28. These bands are typically used by State Department of Agriculture personnel when they are working with birds that need to be permanently identified.

Still another form of permanent identification for birds are **WING BANDS (FIG. 4)**. Wing bands are not often used but they do provide another option as the numbered band is attached over the web cord that lies on the leading edge between the shoulder and the wrist of the birds' wing. These bands cost about 10 to 11 cents each and require an applicator that is approximately \$15. One of the biggest problems with wing bands is that they are more difficult to see and may require some feather manipulation to find and read, requiring you to capture and handle the bird to determine its number.

Perhaps the most permanent and long-lasting identification method for use in poultry is the **SEALED LEG BAND (FIG. 5)**. These bands come in several types, (plastic, aluminum, steel, stainless steel) and can be quite variable in price from a low of around 45 cents each to a couple of dollars apiece. The most expensive ones are can be customized to your operation and include additional information

including the current year, an identifying number and some sort of farm identification. The more customization, the higher the price. One of the best things about seamless bands is that they will generally last the lifetime of the bird that is banded, however one of the pitfalls, is that they have to be put on the bird during a very specific timeframe in order to slip up the foot on unto the leg of the bird. If you wait too long, the band will not slip over the lower portion of the foot, and if you put it on too early, it may slip off.

Seamless bands provide both permanent identification with an individual number and the year in which the birds were hatched, making it easier for folks to track these birds within their own flocks. Secondly, coupled with a zip tie placed right below the seamless band, I can ensure that the band will not slip off the foot of the bird and once the bird grows to adult size, the zip tie can be removed.

Another form of identification of birds is the use of **TOE PUNCHES (FIG 6-7)**. This method is more restrictive but it is permanent and can allow you to identify up to 16 different groups of individuals. In the exhibition poultry world, it is commonly used as a way of identifying individual matings. Toe punch tools are generally available for 6 to 8 dollars each.

For you high tech individuals out there, the last method of identification that I'd like to mention is using **MICRO-CHIPS (FIG. 8)**. Most people are aware of the use of micro-chips in dogs and cats however the cost of this technology has come so far down that it is now an alternative for our hobby. Currently, microchips costs just over one dollar each. The micro-chips (about the size of a grain of rice) do require a micro-chip reader which can cost 20 to 40 dollars but this, like application pliers, is a one-time expense. Micro-chips are injected into the left breast muscle of the bird and once implanted, will be a permanent identification mark. To read the chip, you need to place the reader over the site where the micro-chip is implanted and the reader will identify the number on the chip. One advantage of micro-chips is that without a reader, no one will know that your bird is marked. This is advantageous should birds be stolen and if you are fortunate to relocate them, the chip will serve as proof that the birds are yours. This method of identification can be used with some of the more valuable birds in your flock. One pitfall of the microchip is that if you use them, you need to be aware that if your birds are sold into the food chain, the chip will result in a contamination problem in the meat.

Obviously, there are still some other types of identification that have been used in the past that I have not included here, but for the most part, these methods are relatively inexpensive, available and easy to use.

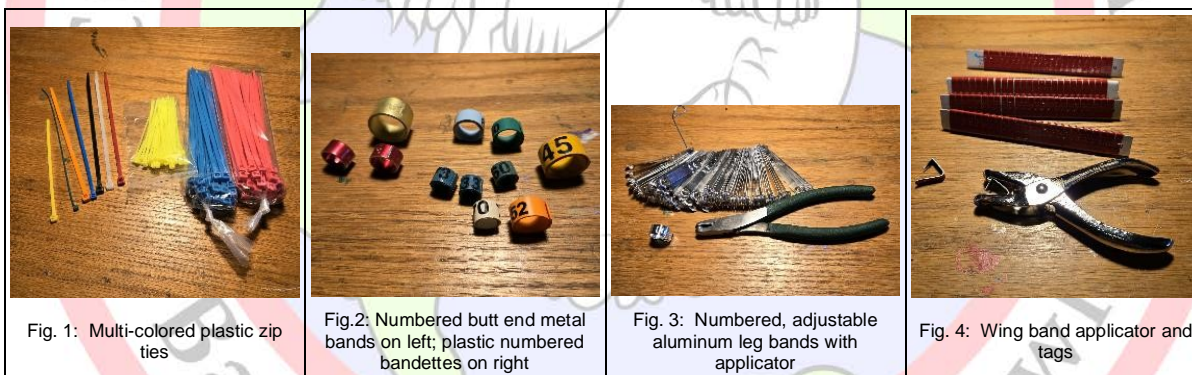


Fig. 1: Multi-colored plastic zip ties

Fig.2: Numbered butt end metal bands on left; plastic numbered bandettes on right

Fig. 3: Numbered, adjustable aluminum leg bands with applicator

Fig. 4: Wing band applicator and tags

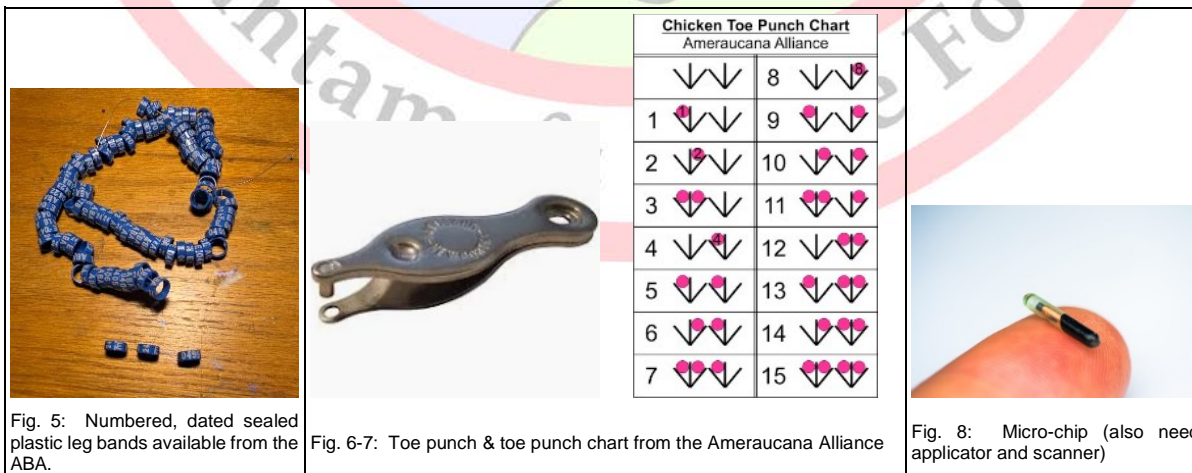


Fig. 5: Numbered, dated sealed plastic leg bands available from the ABA.

Fig. 6-7: Toe punch & toe punch chart from the Ameraucana Alliance

Chicken Toe Punch Chart Ameraucana Alliance		
	8	
1	9	
2	10	
3	11	
4	12	
5	13	
6	14	
7	15	

Fig. 8: Micro-chip (also need applicator and scanner)