

Celebrating our Feathered Kin

by Elaine Friebele

“It’s a cardinal,” shouts intern Doug Kaylor as we approach the net. The bright red bird is dangling upside down in the fine net, its feathers pointed skyward. Gently, Doug extricates the bird’s feet, wings, and head from the netting. “Male, previously banded,” he says, reading the impossibly small numbers on the bird’s metal leg band.

On this day in June, three volunteers and four interns are participating in the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship Bird-netting Study (M.A.P.S.), which measures the breeding success and year-to-year survival of songbirds that nest in our forests. Jug Bay is one of over 400 banding sites across North America from which the National Institute for Bird Populations coordinates data collection and compilation. As the sun rose, the interns unfurled 17 mist nets like invisible webs among the trees. The unsuspecting birds flew

the eggs. Later on, we find a male downy woodpecker with a brood patch. “Downies are one of the few species in which the male helps incubate the eggs,” says volunteer Danny Bystrak, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist and birder extraordinaire, who supervises the netting and banding.

“No significant flight feather wear; no fat, no feather molt,” Danny says, while the cardinal pinches his finger hard with its bright red beak. These observations help determine the condition and recent activity of the birds. If we were netting in the fall, we’d likely detect some body fat, as birds put on significant amounts of fat in preparation for migrating. “CP 2,” he says. CP stands for cloacal protuberance, a seasonal swelling of the male cloaca—a sign of readiness to breed. Then Danny measures the length of the wing and weighs the bird by placing it into a cloth bag, which he clips to a hanging scale. Once the bird’s



Flight feathers are spread to check for wear.

“Therefore, a wood thrush,” she adds. Though the thrush is quiet while being held, I remember its lovely, flute-like song filling the forests.

The thrush’s dark brown eye is quite large, considering the size of the bird. It stares at us with an expression that is free of fear. The bird has “the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief,” as poet Wendell Berry put it. Eyes seem to be the only things that that we—the bird and I—have in common. I have no horny bill, no skinny reptile-like legs, no beautiful feathers, nor wings to fly. I am fascinated by the birds’ feet—the long, flexible toes and claws, which wrap around branches, twigs, and even grasses when they perch. Our diets differ substantially, as I do not have an appetite for insects. And yet, we are related. Our bodies hold similar organs. Our cells, directed by DNA, work the same way. Perhaps my cells come to attention when I see the thrush, recognizing some of their kin. Do the cells of the thrush do the same when the bird sees me?

This thrush is not banded. Intern Beth Nicholls carefully selects an appropriately-sized, numbered metal band and hands it to Danny, who clamps it onto the bird’s leg, making sure that it is loose enough to avoid constricting the leg and that there are no protruding edges. The band number is recorded.

If the thrush evades predators and survives migration, another bander may find it in Mexico or in Panama next winter—or (much more likely) the MAPS volunteers could capture it in one of our nets next



An ovenbird captured during the MAPS study.

into them, becoming tangled until freed. Throughout the morning, we make complete rounds of all 17 nets every hour on the hour.

“No brood patch,” Doug says. That means the bird’s breast area has no featherless patch reddened by a network of tiny blood vessels. In most bird species, the female plucks away breast feathers to create the brood patch, which enables her to incubate

vital statistics have been taken, he opens his hand, and the cardinal flies away into the forest. We hike quickly to the next net, which holds a single brownish bird.

“ID quiz,” says Danny.

“Dalmatian bird,” intern Sarah Glatt replies, referring to the brown spots on the thrush’s white breast. The interns, schooled primarily in amphibians and reptiles, are quickly learning to identify the local birds.

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summer. Most of the songbirds at Jug Bay return to the same nesting areas each year. Many birds have been found two, three, or even five years after their initial banding. These data help the Institute for Bird Populations follow trends in songbird populations as the birds face the continuing challenge of diminished habitats and changing environments. Interestingly, populations of wood thrushes, which require forest interior habitat, have been declining in North America as forests disappear. But at Jug Bay, wood thrush populations seem to be thriving.

As we make the round of nets, we find a variety of birds: Acadian flycatchers, tufted titmice, common yellowthroats, downy woodpeckers, prothonotary warblers, pee wees, and a tiny blue-gray gnatcatcher, which weighs a total of six grams! We catch a female red-winged blackbird. The jet-black male, with its red and yellow epaulets is very striking as it flies over the marsh; in contrast, the female appears to be a rather drab brown. But up close, I fall in love with her

rusty feathers variegated with gold.

Checking a net overlooking the creek, we find an ovenbird—dubbed “the small Dalmatian” by the interns because the small brown bird with the rust-stripped cap also has a white breast spotted with brown. We are distracted by a racket of chipping and squawking surrounding the net. According to Danny, the female ovenbird flew into the net at an inopportune time, as her brood was just fledging. We cannot see the tiny birds among the vegetation, but their cries fill the air. Apparently, this is one of the successful ovenbird nests that was not parasitized by cowbirds. According to studies conducted at the Sanctuary by Smithsonian Environmental Research Center scientist Pauline Roberts, cowbirds lay their eggs in about 50% of ovenbird nests, letting the female ovenbird incubate the cowbird eggs. Even with these odds against them, most ovenbird pairs manage to raise some of their own young each year.

Toward the end of the morning, birds in the nets become sparser, and the group spreads out to check different nets. At one of the last nets near the marsh, I find a

beautiful bird with blue feathers. A blue grosbeak. It is unusual to find this bird in the forest, for it inhabits open, brushy areas. As I extricate the bird from the fine mesh, it bites my finger hard. Now I know why it is so named, for the hefty beak is producing a fair amount of pain. Volunteer Mike Quinlan substitutes a stick for my finger. Pain or no pain, I feel privileged to hold this almost weightless blue-feathered animal with piercing black eye, and to feel its rapid heartbeat against my hand.

Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary was chosen as the “Best Place to Commune with Nature” by the *Bay Weekly’s* Best of the Bay readers’ survey!

