



# RESEARCHERS BAND BIRDS

*to keep track of them through time*

BY LARRY GRIFFIN

A group of researchers and students from the North Carolina School of Math and Science spent the morning of Tuesday, June 25 catching birds in nets to put small ribbons around their feet.

It's called bird banding, and according to Highlands Biological Station assistant director Jason Love, the point is to look into the habits of birds through the years.

This is a nationwide project called MAPS, or Monitoring Avian Predictions and Survivorship, according to Love, who was also in attendance. Love said researchers do some bird banding about every 10 days in the summer as part of the MAPS project.

Love said the process involves capturing birds in the large nets they set up at a few locations around the Biological Station, taking it to their table to look into its various qualities, and then letting them go with a band around their leg to hopefully track their health and progress through the years.

"We're at the net 45 minutes before daybreak," said Love. "30 minutes before sunrise, we open the net. We have to get up early. We have two nets deployed, and we check them every 30 minutes. Communication is key. We have a radio to see if anyone needs help. We go until noon, it's about a six or seven-hour run. By the end of the day, we've walked about seven miles checking all the nets."



## PICTURED

### PREVIOUS PAGE:

*Biologist Gavin Greenberg, who works with the Blue Ridge Bird Observatory, lets North Carolina School of Math and Science student Morgan Cutlip hold a blue jay caught in a recent bird banding session in Highlands. Greenberg and Bird Observatory director Mark Hopey taught her how to hold the bird so as not to hurt it.*

*A blue jay caught safely by biologists who want to track the birds around the area to assess the overall health.*

### CURRENT PAGE:

*An adult male prairie warbler models a metal ID band on its leg.*



## CARING FOR BIRDS

Blue Ridge Bird Observatory director Mark Hopey said they try their best to take care of the birds. “The birds are inconvenienced for a short time, but we get a lot of information. We know how many birds are here, we know their ages. If they like it here, they return year after year.”

Hopey was extremely conscious of concerns around the birds. “People worry about birds,” he said.

Love said they make sure not to keep the birds too long – they get their data and then let them go.

“We want to get them back to nature as soon as possible,” he said. “Particularly if it’s a female. You want Mom back on the nest, if she’s feeding.”

Things were slower during the banding. They didn’t find many birds for the first part of the day. They did catch a blue jay, and biologist Gavin Greenberg with the Bird Observatory held, chronicled its moulting and looked at its general condition.

“We measure the bird’s condition, we see if there’s ticks or the bird has any injuries,” Hopey said. “We look to see if it’s underweight, or if it’s gaining weight. We’re able to look at the

breeding, its nesting cycle.”

With just five years of bird banding under their belt, the Highlands Biological Station’s data is still too new to be relevant. But Love said it will get there in a few years. “In 10 years, or 20 years, we’ll see some trends.”

Hopey was optimistic about the general project.

“We’ve caught some birds that returned,” he said. “We caught a gray cat bird. There were several that returned and had reproduced.”

Hopey said around 50% of the birds they find are migrant birds, just traveling through the area. He said they keep tabs on that as well to see if they reproduce while they’re here.

He said Highlands’ “gentle approach” to management made it a good habitat for birds, as well as not spraying harmful chemicals that would drive birds away.

“A station like this is a stable habitat,” he said. “Other stations are keeping tabs on places that are changing. You use this as a control, combined with enough data from similar habitats.”





## TROUBLED FUTURE

Love said Highlands is unique because the research station is located within the city limits – unlike many places, where the research station is in remote locations. This helps the Biological Station understand what happens when the birds interact with human development.

“It allows us to get a better understanding of human impact,” Love said. “Recently when we were bird banding, there was new construction, where there was a new house going in, they were taking down the trees. On Big Bear Pen, there was a jackhammer going all the time, because they’re widening the road. Anecdotally, that’s usually our most productive net, but we didn’t catch much that day. I’m guessing it’s just because of all the noise and construction going on.”

Love said he’s invested in bird banding because of the way the bird populations are dwindling.

“Programs like this are important,” he said. “The bird population declined 30% in North America since the 70s. Other

parts of the world are higher.”

His hope is that they can use the bird-banding data to prove a point to those who have the power to make decisions.

“We hope we can show policy makers that there are things like developments and climate change that impact wildlife, and it is happening in our region,” he said.

He’d like to see more of a concentrated effort from all sectors of society to preserve the environment and help animal species thrive.

“We all have to live, but do we all need two houses? Do we all need three houses? We just need to be more mindful of our impact,” he said.

Later he added that he saw HBS’s role as essentially chronicling what’s going on.

“We’re taking note of what’s happening to the natural world. It’s raining plastic and birds are declining, bats are declining.”