

Cook: As the Cerulean warbler flies

By David Cook

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Somewhere in the tallest trees in the greenest forests within our very own Tennessee River Gorge, there lives a most magnificent bird: the Cerulean warbler.

It is small -- 8 grams or so -- and could perch on the lip of an espresso cup.

Its chest is white, like Elsa's frozen palace, and its back feathers are blue, like Sinatra's eyes.

It is bold, like a Red Bull commercial. Nesting in the tops of the highest trees, the mama Cerulean doesn't dare fly casually out of the nest; predators would spot her instantly. Instead, she surreptitiously plunges straight down, like a bungee-jump off the edge of the nest, and only opens her wings just before the forest floor, where she hunts and dines before making her return trip, limb by limb, back up the tree to her waiting young.

The Cerulean warbler is a beautiful creature ... and it is disappearing.

"It is the most rapidly declining songbird in North America," Rick Huffines said Monday morning.

Huffines is executive director of the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, which works to preserve the Gorge, our Eden, through land acquisition and stewardship. There are thousands of creatures inside the Gorge, but these days, Huffines has his eye on the Cerulean warbler.

"It is an indicator species," he said.

A healthy warbler population indicates a healthy forest; likewise, a declining population reflects an ill forest. Within this tiny bird an entire world's story exists. The Cerulean warbler represents the wellness of our forests, the inter-connectivity of our world, and how daily things -- like your morning cup of coffee -- can contain huge consequences for all creatures, great and small.

"Its home grounds are in Colombia," Huffines said.

This September, the Cerulean warblers will leave their nests here in the Gorge and greater Cumberland Plateau and migrate two thousand miles back home, to the northern Andes mountains of Colombia, where they winter until April, when they return here for another season of breeding and nesting.

There in Colombia, the Cerulean warbler loves the biodiversity and tall trees of shade-grown forests of coffee plantations, which are opposite of the sun-grown plantations: large strips of treeless, canopy-less lands where coffee is grown yet bio-diversity not supported.

(So, literally, the coffee we choose to drink has an effect on this little bird, as well as thousands of other creatures.)

Yet a blend of deforestation, sprawl and forest mismanagement -- both here and there -- has threatened the existence of this bird.

Several months ago, Hannah Shadrick -- the creative and business director for the Trust, who blogs at www.trgt.org/blog -- was sitting at Velo Coffee -- the urban roasters who deliver by bike -- and had an idea. She turned to Andrew Gage, the bearded owner of Velo, and asked him a question:

If I figured out how to get some shade-grown coffee from this region in Colombia, would you roast it and sell it?

Sure, he said. No problem.

That's why today at 5 p.m. at The Farmer's Daughter on Hixson Pike, a new "Cerulean warbler" coffee -- grown from shade-grown beans from the Tierradentro region of Colombia, where the little blue bird lives -- will be unveiled to Chattanooga, thanks to the friendship between Velo and the Gorge.

The event is free, with the first 20 bike-commuters receiving a free bag of Cerulean coffee.

"Many, many, many species will benefit from us saving this one bird," Huffines said.

We save what we love, and we love what we understand. Learning about the Cerulean warbler in turn helps you understand about an ecology that supports a whole host of other wildlife -- white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, gray squirrels, ruffed grouse, black bear -- while also teaching us about consequences of how we live in the urban areas upstream of the Gorge.

"If there is something wrong with our forest, it means there is something wrong with our city," Shadrick said.

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IF YOU GO

What: Cerulean Warbler Coffee Tasting

Where: The Farmer's Daughter, 1211 Hixson Pike

When: Today, 5-7 p.m.

What: Free, with appetizers and the first 20 bicyclists receiving a complimentary bag of Velo coffee