



Coffee  
in the  
Shade  
with  
Songbirds

Story by Dick Morel  
Photography by David and Eli Andrews

A SMALL BUSINESS, A NONPROFIT AND SOUTH AMERICAN  
COFFEE GROWERS TEAM UP TO HELP A WARBLER.

**C**hattanooga is again on the cutting edge of building partnerships within and beyond our community. Velo Coffee, a widely popular micro-roaster of first quality coffees and the Tennessee River Gorge Trust provide an example of combining concern for the environment with the efforts of a small business to support a biological conservation program.

The Tennessee River Gorge Trust oversees approximately 17,000 of 27,000 acres of diverse ecosystems along the Tennessee River. The Trust's website states their mission: "To preserve the Tennessee River Gorge as a healthy and productive resource through land protection, education, community engagement and good land stewardship practices."

The mission includes biological research. Hannah Shadrick, Business and Creative Director at the Trust pointed out last April in her blog, "We will be launching two projects: a two-year survey of the songbird called the



Graduate student Holland Youngman and songbird friend.



Andrew Gage carries shade-grown coffee that is available at Earth Fare, Whole Foods, Pruetts and Grocery Bar.

cerulean warbler and a long-term monitoring of all migratory birds nesting in and passing through the Tennessee River Gorge."

On June 17th, they announced the two-year cerulean research project sponsored by the Benwood Foundation at a well-attended gathering, the "Cerulean Warbler Coffee Tasting and Research Kickoff" hosted by The Farmer's Daughter Restaurant. Rick Huffines, the Trust's director described the context and goals of the research project. The "coffee tasting" relates to the role of Velo Coffee and the nature of its support.

*continued on page 44*



One aspect of the research will attempt to assess the health of members of this species in the Gorge. "The warbler is an indicator species," Huffines says. "If it's healthy, the forest is healthy then so are we." Dr. David Aborn, of the UTC Department of Biological and Environmental Science is a bird specialist advising on the project.

"Since ecosystems provide us with cleaner air, cleaner water, food and recreational opportunities, then if those ecosystems are in poor condition, it has an impact on area residents," says Aborn.

Another dimension of the project involves Holland Youngman, a graduate student studying for a Masters Degree in environmental science at UTC. She will be working in the field under the supervision of Dr. Aborn.

"We want to find where they hang out," says Youngman. "Knowing their habitat will provide an opportunity to understand how these birds interact with their natural surroundings."

The life cycle of the cerulean warbler begins here in the north. Fledglings spend time growing into mature adults and storing fat reserves that will be vital for surviving their long fall migration to their winter homes in the Andes of South America. Huffines and his colleagues will, as one assessment of the bird's health, measure the amount of fat they were

able to store by summer-long feeding in our forests. That in turn will indicate how well the forest has served them. A healthy forest will have provided adequate fuel for the trip.

When they reach the high Andes Mountains in Columbia, South America, after flying distances of roughly 3,000 miles, they nest in forests that include coffee that grows under the forest's shade. This

shade-grown farming technique is at risk as coffee prices fluctuate and pressure to switch to higher-yield sun coffee or other crops intensifies. That's where Velo Coffee and Hannah Shadrack of the Trust come in. Velo Coffee has teamed up with the Tennessee River Gorge Trust to promote the sale of Columbian shade-grown coffee as one means of helping to preserve the southern habitat of the cerulean warbler, the fastest disappearing songbird in North America with a decline of 70% since 1960.

Shadrack is a coffee lover and well aware of the plight of the warbler. "I was sitting in Velo's coffee roastery reading about how shade-grown coffee protects bird habitat. ...I saw "Colombian coffee" written on the chalkboard in front of me at the coffee bar," says Shadrack.

"A light went off and I called over my shoulder, 'Hey Andrew'

continued on page 46

**"We are all connected by the beauty, but just like all art, we each have different affinities for what we love about it. The success of all conservation efforts today will be directly tied to a community's ability to link those affinities and illustrate the interdependence and responsibility we have to each other."**

**—RICK HUFFINES**

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TRGT's Rick Huffines recovers netting near the field station.



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(Andrew Gage owns and operates Velo's) would you carry a shade-grown coffee if I can find it?" Andrew replied with a simple, "Sure." The problem became finding a region where shade-grown coffee that measured up to Andrew's demanding standards of quality co-existed with cerulean warblers. They found one and the association was off and running.

Velo's contribution is two-fold. Buying shade grown coffee helps preserve diverse forest ecosystems in South America, and their packaging promotes public awareness of the plight of the cerulean warbler. Among their many varieties you will find one with an image of the cerulean warbler stamped on it, and a message on the back about the warbler. The beans inside were grown in the shade of a Columbian forest harboring cerulean warblers.


The public awareness aspect began at the Farmer's Daughter kick off. Linda Pillow of Signal Mountain attended and says, "I am proud, ecologically-speaking, to say that I purchased my first shade-grown Velo brand coffee from a restaurant on Signal Mountain that serves only the Velo brand. I look forward to introducing some of my friends to shade-grown coffee and connecting the dots for them between the plight of cerulean warblers, the Tennessee River Gorge Trust's mission, and shaded coffee beans far away in South America." The coffee tasting event became an international information session for the community members and their friends.

"What makes their efforts so powerful is they've found a way to connect this little bird to America's favorite morning obsession... coffee," says Colleen Sharkey of Columbus, Ohio, who attended the presentation. "The TRGT and Velo coffee are giving we coffee lovers

the opportunity to improve cerulean warblers' chance for survival every morning if we purchase shade-grown coffee. It seems most stories we hear about endangered species seem so far away... but here we have a reason to think about the cerulean warbler every morning!"

Velo Coffee can be found downtown on the shelves of Whole Foods, Grocery Bar and on Signal Mountain at The Olive Bean, and Pruetts Market.

Two employees at Pruetts are involved with the TRGT. Jesse Watlington, the grocery manager notes that, "We support local producers and companies, and especially appreciate Velo Coffee's involvement in the warbler project." Jesse knows the Trust and has volunteered his time there. The Cerulean Warbler Project is of special interest to John Diener an employee at Pruetts and a biologist who will be involved in tagging birds at the Gorge's research site.

"Conservation leaders in the current era will only realize success when they come to the notion that there is a nexus between each one of us in our appreciation of the 'art' of the natural world," says Huffines eloquently. "We are all connected by the beauty, but just like all art, we each have different affinities for what we love about it. The success of all conservation efforts today will be directly tied to a community's ability to link those affinities and illustrate the interdependence and responsibility we have to each other." 

Visit [www.trgt.org](http://www.trgt.org) for more information on this and other projects.

Dick Morel lives in Chattanooga and writes for science and biology journals and textbooks.



Graduate student Holland Youngman bands birds for monitoring at the new field station.