

# Fly away, birdie

**I'm terrified of birds. At least, I was.**

**While traveling Europe, we stopped in St. Mark's Square in Venice. It is probably the most beautiful square in Europe save for one hideous thing; the same monstrosity found in cities the continent over: pigeons. Flying rats. Though back then I was more afraid of the four-legged kind, which are prominent too.**

**Channeling "Mary Poppins," I decided to feed the birds. I'd scarcely gotten the small bag of seed open when swarms of them descended — onto me.**

Their talons tugged at my clothes. I could feel them pecking. My arms. My head. One almost got stuck in my hair. It was so traumatic, I still shriek if a bird seemingly flies toward me. And I cross the street any time a pigeon shares my sidewalk.

Recently, I decided to cross a river for birds. I got closer than ever before. And it was pretty amazing.

On a hazy, unseasonably cool morning this spring, I joined the Tennessee River Gorge Trust for a visit to their bird banding lab. To get there, we took a kayak trip through the Gorge, known as the Grand Canyon of the South. It was one of the best

ways to spend a morning that I can imagine. The fog played lazily with the surface of the water until the fat, orange sun hovering at the horizon's edge rose enough to shoot warm beams directly at our backs. Yet the air was still crisp. Rays peeked through the Gorge, lighting up the green-carpeted walls surrounding us. Ornithologist-in-training Laura Marsh pointed out various animals as we slowly paddled our way downriver.

The bird banding lab is a research facility where a few very dedicated scientists spend most of their time catching, weighing, measuring, recording and then releasing all manner of birds.



But before sending them on their way, the banders attach a tiny ankle bracelet with a unique number so that the bird's flight patterns, health and survival rate, feeding, nesting and mating patterns can be tracked. There are similar facilities all over the world. In fact, TRGT resident banders John Diener and Lizzie Goodrick have worked at several of them, though the year-old TRGT project is expected to last at least 10-15 years. "Birds are an indicator of the health of the forest," Goodrick says.

The "mist nets" in which the birds get caught are so fine that you can barely see them even when you're looking for them. They're like fishnet pantyhose made of the gauzy string spiders spin for their web. The trapping doesn't hurt the birds at all, though some struggle at the feeling of being caught in something they can't see but which has them all the same. The net collapses into a sort of pocket around the bird. Which makes retrieving them fairly easy, but it's still a delicate process. The nets have to be



**Worm-eating Warbler**

handled carefully else they get tangled around flapping, freaked-out birds. And the nets aren't cheap. Tearing or having to cut them would mean several hundred dollars.

The nets are stretched across several areas within a five-minute walk of the lab; near various trees and plants known to draw birds for one reason or another, and at various heights. Their locations may change as the researchers see which ones seem to work and which ones don't. On my visit, we found birds in three of the four nets on our multiple retrieval trips: a Louisiana waterthrush, blue-gray gnat-catcher, hummingbird and



## Stay tuned

Due to the success of our inaugural trip, TRGT is planning for more. For a notification once dates are finalized, email [hannahs@trgt.org](mailto:hannahs@trgt.org) with the subject line “Kayak.” And volunteers are working to build wooden tent pads with the intention of hosting donors on overnight bird banding excursions complete with homemade breakfast.

PHOTO: KEVIN LIVINGOOD



**Ruby-throated hummingbird**

Pollock style. Back at the lab, they are studied and their information recorded: species, body length, weight, wingspan, amount of fat, sex, estimated age and presence of feather mites. It's a fairly routine-looking process — save for the fat test. Cupping the bird in their hand, first and middle fingers ever so gently securing their neck, the bander blows on the bird's chest, parting downy breast feathers to reveal a tiny rib cage packed with a jaundice-colored waxlike substance. “Their insides are

just hanging out!” I couldn't help but exclaim. Afterward, if they don't already have one, a lightweight metal band is attached to the bird's leg. Though the only sense you'd have that one of the bands was in your hand would be its firm edges, the birds — which often weigh less than a nickel themselves — are aware of their new accoutrement. They may even stop on a nearby branch and give their leg a quick shake.

I watched all this safely — but intrigued — from the

cardinal. The banders check the nets about once an hour, so that any birds caught don't stress out for long and because they may need to eat. After all, they most likely just finished a very long journey back across the Gulf of Mexico. They come to mate.

Once in hand, the birds are slid into small leather pouches that hang from the waist of the banders' pants, which are splattered with guano in a sort of Jackson



sidelines. But the second bird of the day brought me face to face with my fear. I was selected from our group of about 10 for the “honor” of releasing the gray-blue gnatcatcher back into the wild. My heart pounded as I willed myself to reach out my hand and secure her neck between my fingers, cradling her body in my palm and creating a perch for her spindly legs with my other hand. She felt like soft air. None of the clawing talons, frantically flapping wings or abusive beaks that had led to my somewhat neurotic fear of birds.

And with that, I let go.

*(Though I am still terrified of pigeons, geese and seagulls.)*

## Fast facts

**Louisiana waterthrush:** So named not because it's native to Louisiana — in fact you'll rarely ever see one there — but because the species was most likely first spotted in that state.

**Gray-blue gnatcatcher:** It's hard to tell the males and females apart — both have a sort of unibrow.

**Hummingbird:** Their coloring comes from the diffraction of light. The one we studied was actually a uniform iridescent black, though it took on almost every color of the rainbow from various angles.

**Cardinal:** Easy to spot in the winter, cardinals often sport 'do reminiscent of a Rufio from “Hook”.