

Heading South Along the Allegheny Front

Story By Nanci Bross-Fregonara

Nanci Bross-Fregonara

Clouds roll in at the AFMO banding station located at Dolly Sods, in Tucker County.

“Close the nets! Close the nets!” a voice cried out as a gentle rain began to fall at the Allegheny Front Migration Observatory. The sky darkened momentarily as those tending the mist nets quickened the tempo of gently untangling the captured warblers. Nearly 20 bright yellow and black birds had begun to calm down, dangling patiently while awaiting their release. Then, just as carefully, the warblers were placed in separate brown paper bags for “processing.”

Up at the small bird banding station located on Dolly Sods near Bear Rocks, Susan Heselton from Joppa, Maryland and Walter Fye from Knox, Pennsylvania were given a few dozen bags and had the daunting responsibility of identifying, aging and banding the birds. They were already excited about finding a black-poll warbler with a band licensed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in South Dakota and were awaiting confirmation, just a cell phone call away.

For the volunteers who staff this small, remote station, one of the oldest, continuously run banding stations in the nation, this has become an annual tradition, if not a passion. Most are members of the Brooks Bird Club, a highly energetic and



Nanci Bross-Fregonara

Volunteers Steve Sushinsky and Randy Ritter carefully remove some fall migrants from the mist nets.



AFMO founder Ralph Bell carefully walks down to the original station site located in a small outcropping.

Randy Ritter

dedicated group of birders from throughout the state and region. Tom Fox, a DNR conservation officer who has been volunteering nearly 20 years, spends about 15 to 20 days a year at the AFMO, saving his vacation for some hard work and great campfires. He, along with his family, has been instrumental in maintaining the mist net lanes. His enthusiasm has been passed down to his sons who also help out.

The hardy volunteers make camp at the Red Creek Campground, some in tents, long-timers in travel trailers complete with computers, scanners and even pet cats. Randy Ritter and his wife Beth from Falls Church, Virginia have been coming to the AFMO for 20 years-- initially to watch hawk migrations on the weekends-- but now spending 7 to 8 weeks in the Red Creek Campground. He is largely responsible for hooking up the trail-



Volunteers take down the nets located on the hillside.

Nanci Bross-Fregonara

ers to solar power so they can plug into the outside world via laptops.

"We love it up here," Ritter says. When they go back to their more urban environment near Washington, D.C. to check their mail, they long to return. "We've gone down and back in one day," he says. "We couldn't wait to come back." When he first began coming to Dolly Sods, he remembers the volunteers being very generous with information. They still are. Despite the intense work they do, sometimes banding several hundred birds in one day, the volunteers welcome visitors.

Joan Pattison, daughter of AFMO founder Ralph Bell, explains that the first priority for the station is education and outreach. "He wants people to learn and do research," she says. School groups and college students from throughout the area have visited the AFMO and have been able to see some of the extraordinary birds up-close. Last year, more than a thousand people signed the visitor's book. They came from 19 states, Washington, D.C., England, Germany and Spain. Up until a few years ago, students were able to hold the birds, but the threat of West Nile virus has changed that protocol. Today only the volunteers

and licensed banders, such as Heselson, can hold the birds. She and Fye rapidly utter breed codes, weights, and gender to a recorder who has to carefully write all the information. "It has taken me a long time, 43 years, to learn all these confusing fall warblers," Fye laughs. "They still sometimes get me."

For Pattison, the AFMO has been part of her life since she was nine or ten years old. The AFMO has been in continuous operation for 48 years, starting simply in a small rocky outcropping known as "the cave" before moving to its current banding shed. In the nearly five decades of work, over 200,000 birds representing 120 species have been



Individual birds are kept in bags until their vital information is recorded, after which they are released to reduce the amount of stress placed on them.

Nanci Bross-Fregonara

banded. Last year alone 4,445 birds of 79 species were banded.

According to DNR ornithologist Rob Tallman, the AFMO provides the main body of fall migration data generated in the state on songbirds. “While there are others providing information on raptors, the AFMO provides the only data set on migratory songbirds, says Tallman. “And because the banding has been going on there for so many years, it makes their work very important in looking at trends.” Some of the information has also been used for baseline data for wind power discussions, he adds.

Kathy Leo, project leader for the DNR’s wildlife diversity program, says the long-term trend data helped the DNR determine which birds should be on the Species in Greatest Need of Conservation list for the state’s Wildlife Conservation Action Plan.

About 15 years ago, the AFMO expanded its record-keeping to include flyover counts. In these, hummingbirds, blue jays, American goldfinches, raptors and even dragonflies and monarch butterflies are observed and counted as they fly above Bear Rocks heading south. “We have seen thousands of blue jays migrating in one day,” Pattison relates. “Some were even carrying their lunch.”

“Flyovers create a lot of interest among visitors, “ she says. “Hopefully this will influence more people to try to protect the environment and birds.”

While flyover counts require a good set of binoculars, most visitors will see fall migratory songbirds up close, surrounded by experts. Many of the species banded at AFMO occur in West Virginia only during migration. It provides a good opportunity to see many of these species that nest far to the north including the gray-cheeked thrush, Philadelphia vireo, Cape May war-

bler, bay-breasted warbler, blackpoll warbler, Connecticut warbler, Tennessee warbler and the Wilson’s warbler.

A few of the birds banded at AFMO have been recovered as far away as Mexico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Honduras to the south; Manitoba and Quebec to the north and many locations in the U.S. including North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Texas, Mississippi, Florida, Montana and Alaska.

For those who travel the dusty road up to the station and choose to spend hours, days or even weeks volunteering, the attraction runs deep. “Some come to see the mountains and to get away from the constant stress of life in the civilized world,” Pattison says. “The isolation is at times changed by an influx of blueberry or cranberry pickers, hikers and sightseers. But the remote mountain top—where the moon and stars are much brighter; where you can hear the owls, the thumping of the ruffed grouse, the howls of the coyotes, the wind whistling in the red spruce,

the nocturnal calls of the thrushes, warblers; and where old and new friends circle around the campfire—is great for the body and soul,” she adds. “As my father always says, ‘You’ve got to have the



Nanci Bross-Fregonara

Volunteer Susan Heselton carefully holds a red-eye vireo while the information is recorded.

fire within you’.”

Nanci Bross-Fregonara is a public information specialist stationed in Elkins. Rob Tallman assisted with the article.



The banding station is open every morning until approximately 10 a.m. from mid-August to mid-October. It is located across from the Red Creek Camp on Forest Rd. 75.

For more information, or for any birding volunteer opportunities, contact Rob Tallman, robtallman@wvdnr.gov, or call 304-637-0245.

Black-throated Blue Warbler

S. Maslowski/USFWS Photo