

Birds, Banding and Blue Sky

Do you remember the excitement you felt when you used to go on a school field trip? On Saturday, May 9, our Spring Session 2015 Birds in Alberta class went on an excursion to the Strathcona Park bird banding station. It was a beautiful blue sky morning and despite our age, we were just as thrilled and curious as a group of nine year old students.

We were met at the park by Dave Ealey, our ELLA instructor who is a dedicated ornithologist and an assistant bird bander. Only a month prior, Dave had spent ten days banding birds in Belize. At the station, he introduced us to the other members of the Strathcona Park Bird Banding Society: Janos Kovacs, the master bird bander; Art Hughes and Toby-Anne Reimer, both regular volunteers.



ELLA Spring Session 2015, Birds of Alberta class on a field trip. Instructor Dave Ealey is wearing the green jacket in the front row. Sid Dwernychuk is wearing the big hat in the back row centre.

Located in the northeast part of Edmonton, just south of Highway 16 on the east side of the North Saskatchewan River, Strathcona Science Park is the ideal place to catch and band birds. Many follow this segment of the river on their migratory routes or live along its valley. The team bands about 80 different species of mostly passerine birds such as warblers, sparrows, chickadees and wrens throughout the year. They meet about three times a week and set up six huge mist nets. These nets are made of extremely thin monofilament lines almost invisible to the naked eye, but strong enough to withstand the forward motion of a rabbit or magpie. Each net is checked every half hour. During our two hours at the station, two Black-capped Chickadees, a Dark-eyed slate-coloured Junco and a Downy Woodpecker were caught. Dave explained that later this spring, as foliage and insects increased, there would be more birds.

To be a successful bird bander takes skill, experience and a keen eye. First, you must carefully untangle the bird from the netting and place it in a small cloth bag to carry to the banding station. Once there, a tiny numbered band with contact information is clamped on its leg while you hold it firmly in your hand and gently grip its neck between your fingers. You then determine its identity, age, sex and health. The forewing is measured and it is then placed upside-down in a toilet paper tube for weighing before it is released. The entire process only takes a few minutes and all the data is recorded in the official bird bander book. This information is vital to determine not only the species and numbers of birds in Alberta, but also their population trends, migratory routes, territoriality, and feeding behaviour.

It is not uncommon to catch the same bird twice. Two of the birds that morning had been previously banded at that station. However, birds banded in Canada have been discovered thousands of kilometres away. One of Janos's banded birds in Nova Scotia was later found in Argentina.

Afterward, Dave took us on a pleasant stroll on the lengthy boardwalk which was bordered by a variety of bushes such as dogwood, wild rose, saskatoon, wild raspberry and chokecherry. It was a warm, sunny day and the views of the river valley, Rundle Park and the distant city centre were spectacular. But none of these could compare to the sight and the song of the Yellow-rumped Myrtle Warbler we had witnessed earlier that day.

By Sid Dwernychuk