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HERE TO THERE DEPT.

A BIRD'S LIFE

by David Berreby

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If you're a small bird, bound for, say, the Caribbean in the autumn, your stay in New York City will begin around dawn. You'll be worn out from flying through the night and desperate for a safe place to rest and to eat, well, like a bird, which is to say, like a pig. A forest by a river would be perfect. Asphalt, steel, and glass are not. If you happen to land in actual woodland by an actual river in the Bronx, you could be snatched, alien-abduction style, by intelligent beings. Beings who then weigh and measure you, poke you with a needle, and maybe scan you with a super-magnet. And blow hard on your chest. (They always do that.) Also, fit you with a tiny ankle bracelet, to track you for the rest of your life.

If this has happened to you in New York City, it is the work of Chad Seewagen and Eric Slayton, ornithologists who want to understand how birds like you cope with cities, which, inconveniently, have been built under your Atlantic migration route. Birds in an urban park, Seewagen said, are in a tough spot: "They're concentrated into a small area, food is limited, there are lots of people and dogs and other animals all over the place."

As usual during migration season, he had a bird in hand. Five inches long, and weighing about the same as two nickels, the bird stuck its beaked head out above the turret of Seewagen's gently closed fingers and kept completely still except for the *thumpa-thumpa-thumpa* of its heart, beating five hundred times a minute. Seewagen carefully parted the bird's blue-gray head feathers. "See the red on its crown? That's a Nashville warbler. This bird was probably flying all night long from Connecticut. That's like a person running at top speed from sundown to sunup."

After such a night, a warbler drops out of the predawn sky in a condition called "hyperphagia," from the Greek for "eat" and "a lot." It must rebuild its body fat to stay alive and to fuel the next stage of its journey. To know how the city affects birds, Seewagen and Slayton need to know whether they are able to get enough food to plump up to flying weight.

So, for the past four years, in woodland on the grounds of the Bronx Zoo, Seewagen, who is twenty-eight and taciturn, with close-cropped red hair and broad shoulders, and Slayton, who is forty-two and talkative, shaggy, and slight (and also Seewagen's half brother), have netted some four thousand migrants. If you were one of them, you got probed and were let go within five or ten minutes. As far as ornithologists can tell, you'd feel none the worse for your mishap (and way better than if you had run across John James Audubon on a busy afternoon—he counted a day wasted unless he had shot a hundred birds).

The pair recently expanded their program to parts of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Westchester County, but the center of the operation, at the Bronx Zoo, is the Field Laboratory for Integrative Ecological Research (or FLIER), which is a single-wide trailer crammed with stuff from every era in the history of human-avian relations. It has nets that a caveman could understand, rings for bird-banding (which Audubon thought up in the nineteenth century), and the latest tools: a bird-size MRI, an ultrasound scanner, and blood-sample kits.

For a while, Seewagen and Slayton used a Breathalyzer on selected species, transferring exhaled breath from beak to balloon and then to sealed tube; the idea was that a lab would analyze it for carbon content—an indicator of what the bird ate. More recently, they have switched to blood tests. "The blood samples are used for measuring triglyceride levels, to see how fast the bird is able to fatten up, which tells us the quality of its habitat," Seewagen said. The MRI scanner produces pictures of the insides of each captive, revealing every scrap of fat.

This fall, the men worked from a folding table in their sampling areas, where their federal license permits them to string up fine nets on seven-foot metal poles. The other day, Slayton banded a Nashville warbler. He held the bird, beak up, to his lips and blew, parting its breast feathers and revealing the nubby red skin underneath, so that he could gauge its body fat. Then he put the bird head down in a piece of white PVC pipe ("standard Home Depot issue," he said).

Sticking out were the bird's tail and its wire-thin feet, which stirred slightly—strange flowers in a strange vase. The pipe was resting on a digital scale. Seewagen wrote down the bird's weight in his lab notebook and flicked up the PVC. The warbler shot off like an arrow into the surrounding trees, and Slayton turned toward his half brother.

“Can I have another bird, please?” ♦
