

Songbird Banding Project
Hogback Mountain, Fall 2020
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After a fantastic 18 days in operation the autumn season closed on October 10th bringing the pilot year to an end. With the support from so many folks the effort can be summed up as a grand success, and those that were there know first hand that this project could not happen without your support. The care and well being of the birds being studied are of the utmost priority and the extra help insured their safety. In addition, new nets were purchased to replace unsafe older ones and a generous donation from Southern Vermont Audubon offset some of the expense. So before I get into details a big thank you goes out to everyone involved.

The station operated from September 14th through October 10th and one of the immediate take-aways is that next year opening day will be closer to the beginning of September. A quick look at comparative data between the UMASS group from 2015 (August 29 through October 2) and current 2020 data (September 14th through October 10th) shows that at this latitude and elevation a majority of some common migrants had passed through by mid September (such as American Redstarts, Chestnut-sided Warblers, and even many of the Common Yellowthroats). On the back end though by staying open until October 10th the station banded a number of later migrants including two of those classic “confusing fall warblers” Blackpoll and Bay-Breasted Warblers. Even in the hand they look so similar that primary flight feather shape and length comparisons are used to confirm one species from the other. Of course there is always the yellow feet of the blackpoll or the remnant of buff on the flank of a bay-breasted that does work well in the hand if not always when they are in a tree.

Eleven nets were set up this season in comparison to ten in the spring and some new locations were explored. The pilot year has a number of functions such as opening and closing dates, and another being the adjustment of net locations. Net placement consideration is to maximize data collection potentials, so if a net just does not have any action then find a different location. Likewise a sampling of the study sites habitat structure is also an important determinant for selected locations. This study site, which is around the base of Mt Olga, has habitats that consist of early mid successional hardwood forest, opened successional meadow, and mature mixed woodland. New for the autumn season a pair of nets were set up in the opened successional meadow area which historically was an alpine ski slope cut. After a summer of vegetative growth that could support a variety of migrating songbirds there were expectations that these nets would produce great results. That did not happen to the degree anticipated, possibly do the later start, but more likely that the vegetative structure is just not preferred because of the insufficient feeding opportunities which these migrants are so focused on. Further investigation is needed, but the clear absence of birds in that area while the observed presence of birds in similar “meadow structure” habitats in the area supports this query. Dominated by fern and hardwood stump sprouted saplings the growth of other more beneficial meadow plant and grass species are inhibiting and would make all the difference. There is an opportunity to investigate this question further. Adjacent to the study site are areas that are regularly mowed during the summer making them of no value to wildlife, but with a bit of planning to allow a section to grow into its full compliment of meadow species a systematic comparison can be made between these two plots

for presence and abundance of migrants. A simple and effective way to begin to analyze habitat values.

As for some highlights the adult male Connecticut Warbler stands out above the rest. He was a beautiful adult specimen with all the field marks you would expect. A bird only seen passing through during its migration they are easy to miss. Looking similar to the more common Nashville Warbler, by size in the hand there is no comparison. With an average weight of 8 grams, the Connecticut weighs in closer to 15 grams. An enjoyable close second was a Philadelphia Vireo who also was looking sharp and bright with a fresh set of feathers for its long migration south. And of course weighing in at a mere 6 grams (just about the weight of a 5 cent nickel), and arriving at the tail end of the season we had a good flight of both Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Who always bring a spark and spirit with them.

After having a few Grey-cheeked Thrushes and even the couple of Bicknell's Thrush there was some anticipation to see them pass through again, but none were banded. Considering that their nesting grounds are within a distance that could be covered easily with one evenings migration they are likely passing right on over this latitude before sunrise would bring them down for the day, so we will be ready for their return in the spring. Which will include an effort to place nano tag transmitters on some of them which will enable them to be tracked to their eventual northern nesting grounds and then back south during the fall to where they winter.

Collaborations with regional organizations are another important development for spring 2021. An educational experience for schools and other children groups will be promoted via the SVMNH. If and when schools can participate in field trip we will have a good one ready for them. Another is the continued conversation with NH Audubon who is spearheading the New England MOTUS Network. They have been out to our site and are very keen in finding a way to have one of the receiving stations installed around the Hogback Mountain area. Antioch University - New England has had a few of their grad students come for a visit and with continued coordination this study site can offer a variety of opportunities from thesis projects to field techniques training.

Preparations for spring will begin in late April with plans to open the station in early May, weather and snow cover permitting. If you would like to get involved please reach out and you will be updated when we get closer to that date.