

Start to the Nestwatch Season

The 2016 season of Neighborhood/Urban Nestwatch is underway. The goal of these programs is to observe the effect urbanization has on 8 different bird species (Northern Cardinal, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird, Carolina Wren, House Wren, Carolina Chickadee, and Song Sparrow) found in the Washington D.C. area. Additionally, as part of Urban Nestwatch, we travel to underserved schools and educate them on our project, migration, banding, and how they can effect change in their communities to raise these species' population numbers.



Kyle Kennedy and Elaine Franklin banding an American Robin at a school in Silver Spring, MD (c) Allison Huysman

Neighborhood Nestwatch is a citizen science program where birds are banded in neighborhoods in and around the Washington D.C. area. By banding birds we can gather data about individuals and their success from year to year. While technicians capture and band these birds, a big part of the data collection lies in the hands of the homeowners. By monitoring nests and keeping a keen eye out for the banded birds near their homes we can further understand nest success and population numbers for our target species!

In addition to educating the public about avian wildlife, we travel to schools in an effort to expose 2nd - 12th graders to the ever growing problem of declining avian populations. By demonstrating bird banding, kids get a chance to see science happen before their very eyes, and of course, see a wild bird up close! We also play several fun games with the students, including the great migration challenge, where we pretend to be Gray Catbirds and migrate from Costa Rica all the way to Rock Creek Park. Along the way, we encounter polluted marshes, tall glass buildings, and even the dreaded house cat!

Besides having fun, students start to think about the effect humans have on bird populations, and even learn some ways that they can help migratory birds on their long journey.

Throughout the season we hope to update readers about the science behind the programs, interesting facts about our target species, and pictures of beautiful and interesting birds we meet on our quest to help our feathered friends. Here are some of the more interesting captures we have had so far.



Recaptured Northern Cardinal (c) Elaine Franklin

This adult female cardinal (NOCA) was recaptured at a house in Bethesda after being banded as an adult in 2013. Note the very overgrown toenail on her right foot. Being at least four-years-old this year, her healthy appearance plus the presence of a mate indicate that the overgrown toenail is not negatively affecting her.



Common Yellowthroat (c) Jax Mack

Even in an urban setting, our common backyard focal species are not all you can see. During migration, we catch many migrants like this male Common Yellowthroat (COYE) which we caught outside of an elementary school in Falls Church, Virginia. The trashcans, pavement, and fencing in this photo show how even in areas with little green space, migratory songbirds are a common sight at this time of year. This emphasizes the importance of providing habitat for birds in urban areas. Parks like the one next to this school provide critical resting areas for birds as they fly north for the breeding season.



Indigo Bunting (c) Heather Gaetano

During a house visit this beautiful male Indigo Bunting (INBU) was caught on his way to a feeder. While we don't band this bird we decided to take the time to admire the male's bright coloring. The Indigo Bunting's feathers do not have any blue pigment but instead contain structures that refract and reflect blue light. It was an exciting catch!

Week 2 of Nestwatch

One goal of Nestwatch is to monitor bird populations in urban areas. During our visits to homes we search for nests and band eight different focal species; American Robin, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Gray Catbird, House Wren, Northern Cardinal, and Northern Mockingbird. To band a bird we place a lightweight aluminum band with a 9 digit number to the bird's foot. Those numbers act a social security number. Additionally, we put bright plastic color bands on each bird in a unique pattern. These color bands allow technicians and participants the ability to identify individual birds without physically catching the bird again. By banding new birds and resighting previously banded birds we can further understand avian populations. While we actively try to catch our focal species, we also catch non-target species. During migration we catch some very interesting and beautiful birds (pictures below!).

Additionally, we take time on each visit to look for nests belonging to our focal species. Once a nest is found the participants carefully monitor the fate of the nest. Below are some examples of exciting nests we have found in the Washington D.C. area.



Eastern Bluebird Nest © Jax Mack



Carolina Chickadee Nest © Jax Mack



Northern Cardinal Nest ©

JaxMack

With the start of spring has come the start of nest building season. During recent house visits we found a few interesting nests. The nest on the left was most likely made by an Eastern Bluebird (EABL). The light blue eggs are those of the EABL but the three brown speckled eggs are those of a Brown Headed Cowbird (BHCO). This phenomenon is known as nest parasitism. In this scenario The BHCO female laid her eggs in the EABL nest and when they hatch the EABL will care for the BHCO hatchlings. As a result female BHCO have no need for a brood patch.

The middle nest may be difficult to find. During a resight walk we found a Carolina Chickadee nest within this light post. The small hole found just underneath the light held chirping nestlings.

The last nest was originally found with three eggs during a house visit. As the visit continued each of the eggs hatched and the nest was soon filled with three cardinal hatchlings. In the photo you can see two small hatchlings.



Carolina Chickadee © Allison Huysman

As the season progresses, we are seeing many of our focal species defending their nesting territories. This Carolina Chickadee (CACH) was captured at a Nestwatch participant's home in Adelphi, Maryland. Weighing only about 8 to 12 grams each, Carolina Chickadees are the smallest of our focal species. They are known for being acrobatic and nesting in cavities. Throughout the spring, Chickadee calls are a common sound, from both adults defending their territories and nestlings chirping inside their nests.



Baltimore Oriole © Allison Huysman



Yellow-rumped Warbler © Allison Huysman



Mourning Warbler © Kyle Kennedy



Ruby-throated Hummingbird © Kyle Kennedy

Spring migrants are the annual highlight for many birders in our region. These flying gems travel hundreds or thousands of miles each year, traversing an ever-changing patchwork of natural and man-made environments. Younger students in the Urban Nestwatch program experience a simulated migration to learn about the places where migratory birds rest and feed as well as the variety of dangers these travelers face. By the end, the students have a taste for how challenging the journey can be and how they, as young stewards of their local environment, can help our migratory birds to survive their migration each year.

As the US landscape has changed, urban environments have become critical resting stops and breeding grounds for our migratory birds. Moving clockwise from the top left, we have an immature male Baltimore Oriole caught in a Neighborhood Nestwatch participant's backyard in Maryland. One of our most numerous migrants is the Yellow-rumped Warbler, also known in this region as a Myrtle Warbler. This is an adult female as shown by her lack of a black mask and the brownish tinge to her back feathers.

An adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbird happened upon our nets one sunny morning. A special banding permit is required to band hummingbirds, so when we catch them we simply check their tiny feet for bands and let them go if they are unbanded, which is generally what we find. If we were to catch a banded hummingbird we would record the band number along with the sex and an estimate of its age.

This adult male Mourning Warbler was passing through the DC area on its way to its breeding grounds in the northern US and southern Canada. The presence of these species in urban backyards underscores the importance of these pockets of habitat for our regional and international migratory birds. For more information about how you can support birds on your property visit:

- [Audubon at Home Wildlife Sanctuary Program](#)
- [How to Create a Bird-Friendly Yard](#)
- [Garden for Wildlife](#)
- [All About Birds - Landscaping](#)

