

2023

NEWSLETTER

YEARLY REPORT



PREPARED BY
Kyle Shepard

BANDING
COALITION OF THE
AMERICAS

A message from us to you:

As we fly into the new year, we'd like to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude to each and every one of you. Reflecting on this year, we are filled with immense appreciation for the support, enthusiasm, and camaraderie that you all have brought to our family of bird loving fanatics.

This year has been nothing short of extraordinary. From new friends and rare birds to expanding our reach all the way to the New York Times, none of this would be possible without your ongoing support. Each like, comment, share, and interaction makes a difference. Whether you've been here from the beginning or joined along the way, thanks for being part of the BCA family.

We are thrilled to share with you this year-end report that encapsulates our accomplishments, milestones, and growth. So much has happened this year that we are adding a table of contents! Your contributions have helped propelled us forward, and we are excited about the opportunities and adventures that the coming year holds.

We hope you've had a joyful holiday season and a fantastic start to the new year!

With heartfelt gratitude,
Kyle and Emma

Kyle Shepard
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All banding is being conducted under a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the U.S. Geological Survey's BBL.

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TLDR:

Total Banded for 2023 - 1761

2022/2023 Winter Hummers - 23 banded, 3 species

Purple Martin Geolocators Retrieved - 6 out of 22 Deployed

Dauphin Island Banding with DIBS - 129 banded, 30 species

Orange Beach Banding- Spring: 36 banded, 15 species **Fall:** 19 banded, 13 species

Purple Martins - 790 banded, 78 Geolocators Deployed

Fort Morgan Banding - 527 banded, 55 species

Species of note: Western Tanager, Western Wood-Pewee, Bicknell's Thrush

Educational Outreach / Banding Demos: Banding Demo at Kreher Park, Class with Nature Connect Alabama, the Environmental Studies Center's Open House, Hummingbird Banding Demo at Pascagoula River Audubon Center, Osher Lifelong Learning Talk

Media: Mississippi Public Broadcasting's "Creature Comforts"
Fort Morgan Banding coverage by Debbie Williams with WKRG News 5
Mullet Wrapper

*Featured in the **New York Times** for Fort Morgan Banding event which serves more than 10,000,000 subscribers through their print and digital platforms and 17,800,000 followers on Instagram. Special thanks to Micah Green for making this happen!*

Things to note: Having been granted permission to band American Kestrels by the state of Georgia, the Raptor Research segment of BCA is finally off the ground and being headed by John Taylor. As we obtain permissions for more raptor species you can expect to see more posts coming from John about what we are doing. We will begin raising money for GPS transmitters is currently underway.

Jason Pyron, one of our newest trainees has volunteered to start writing a few blog posts for us a year. You can find Jason's first blog post on our website.

Project HUMMER is off the ground and we expect to be putting solar tags on hummingbirds by mid-summer with a goal to deploy trackers on Buff-bellied Hummingbirds next fall.

After being published in the NYT, we were flooded with emails about volunteering. Kyle is working diligently to identify current things we need help with. In the midst of our hectic personal lives and the inner workings of BCA, we thank you all for being patient and understanding with us. Feel free to send us a reminder if you have reached out and not heard anything from us.

Many thanks to Becky Hire who has been working with us behind the scenes

This year has been filled with great birds and even better friends. We look forward to many more years of research and sharing our knowledge and passion with you all. Regardless of all we have going on, at the end of the year, if we got at least one person hooked on birds, we have done our jobs. We hope you enjoy this report!



2022/2023 WINTER HUMMER WRAP-UP

While we can't hold a candle to the winter hummingbird work done by Fred Bassett and Fred Dietrich with Hummingbird Research Inc., we are happy to help in any way we can. Turns out being retired gives you a lot of freedom to chase hummers. Kyle and Emma are working to position themselves professionally to have more winter free time to commit to chasing winter hummers in addition to training new hummer banders along the coast to help cover everything we can.

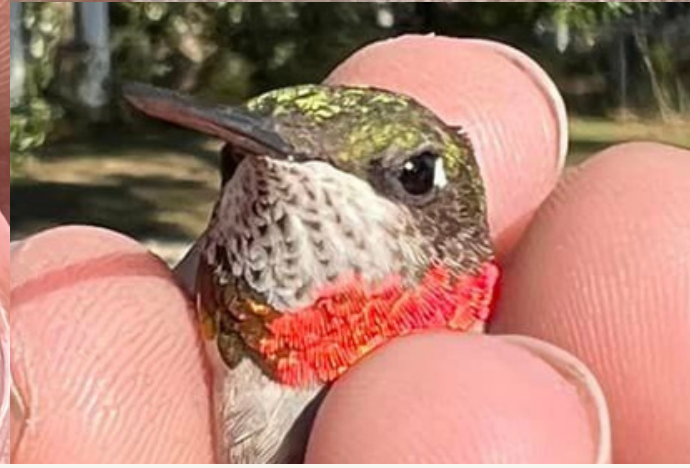
For the 2022/2023 winter season we banded 25 individuals.

4 Black-chinned Hummingbirds

1 Ruby-throated Hummingbird

20 Rufous Hummingbirds

The 2023/2024 season is already off to a good start!





Southeastern American Kestrel Project



Southeastern American Kestrel Project

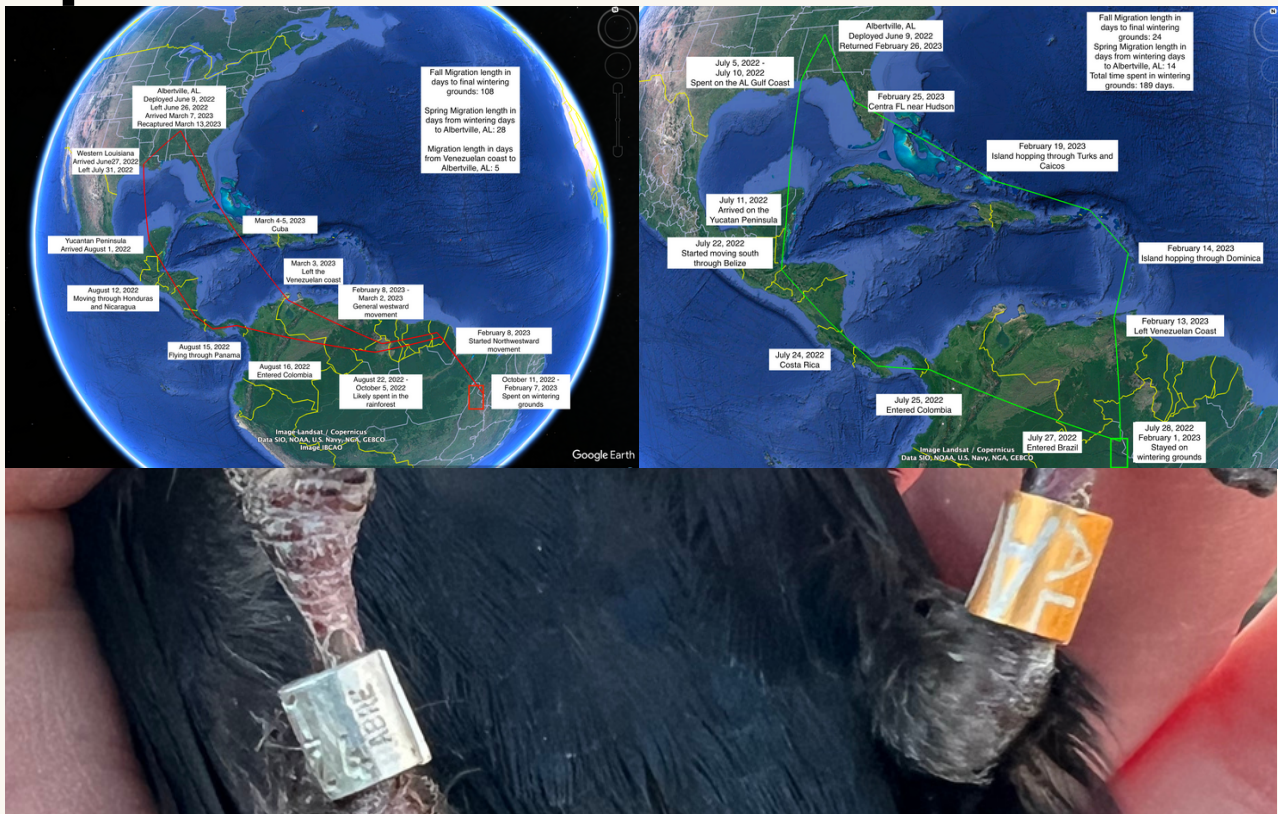
This project is the brainchild of John Taylor who, along with heading up our Kestrel work, will be heading up the vast majority of our future raptor research with full support of Kyle and Emma. John has been an incredible asset to our team from the very start but now he can really shine with what he loves the most. Special thanks to Fred and Brandee Moore for giving us the necessary training to obtain our Kestrel permissions.



The purpose of this project is primarily to add as much information as we can to the current understanding of American Kestrel's full annual cycle through banding with alpha-numeric color bands (for easy ID in the field), collection of feather and blood samples for DNA analysis by Amanda Carpenter at the Bird Genoscape Project, and through GPS tracking devices. We hope over the next few years to have a good understanding of winter ground movements of Kestrels and how the influx of migrant Kestrels affect resident Kestrels.



Purple Martin Geolocator Retrieval



Out of the 22 geolocators we deployed in 2022, we were able to retrieve 6! Five of them contained viable data to give us an idea of the respective migratory paths. Now 6 out of 22 seems like a terrible return rate but it's actually a very good return rate considering these birds traveled to Brazil and back again! More on Purple Martins later.





First Spring Banding at Dauphin Island - Partnership with DIBS



First Spring Banding at Dauphin Island - Partnership with DIBS

129 Birds Banded, 30 species



This event was co-hosted by BCA and Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (DIBS). Like us, DIBS is a small non-profit organization that runs off of donations and volunteers with the mission to conserve critical migratory bird habitat on Dauphin Island. We ran a two-day public banding event in April 2023. Since it was success (with around ~300 visitors in 2-days!), we have decided to partner to make this an annual week long banding event in the spring of 2024. This allows us to monitor migration at another critical stopover site along the Alabama Gulf Coast as Dauphin Island is what is known as an established "Important Bird Area".

Even with it just being a weekend banding demo, we had a great turnout both for guests and birds. Our 2024 dates are April 6-10! We hope to see you all there!

During this event we had Neil Jernigan drop by while on assignment for Southern Environmental. He was kind enough to share his incredible photos with us and event put together a video about his experience and our missions on his YouTube. That video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZEenBTnlco>



Orange Beach Banding Site



Spring: 36 banded, 15 species

Fall: 19 banded, 13 species

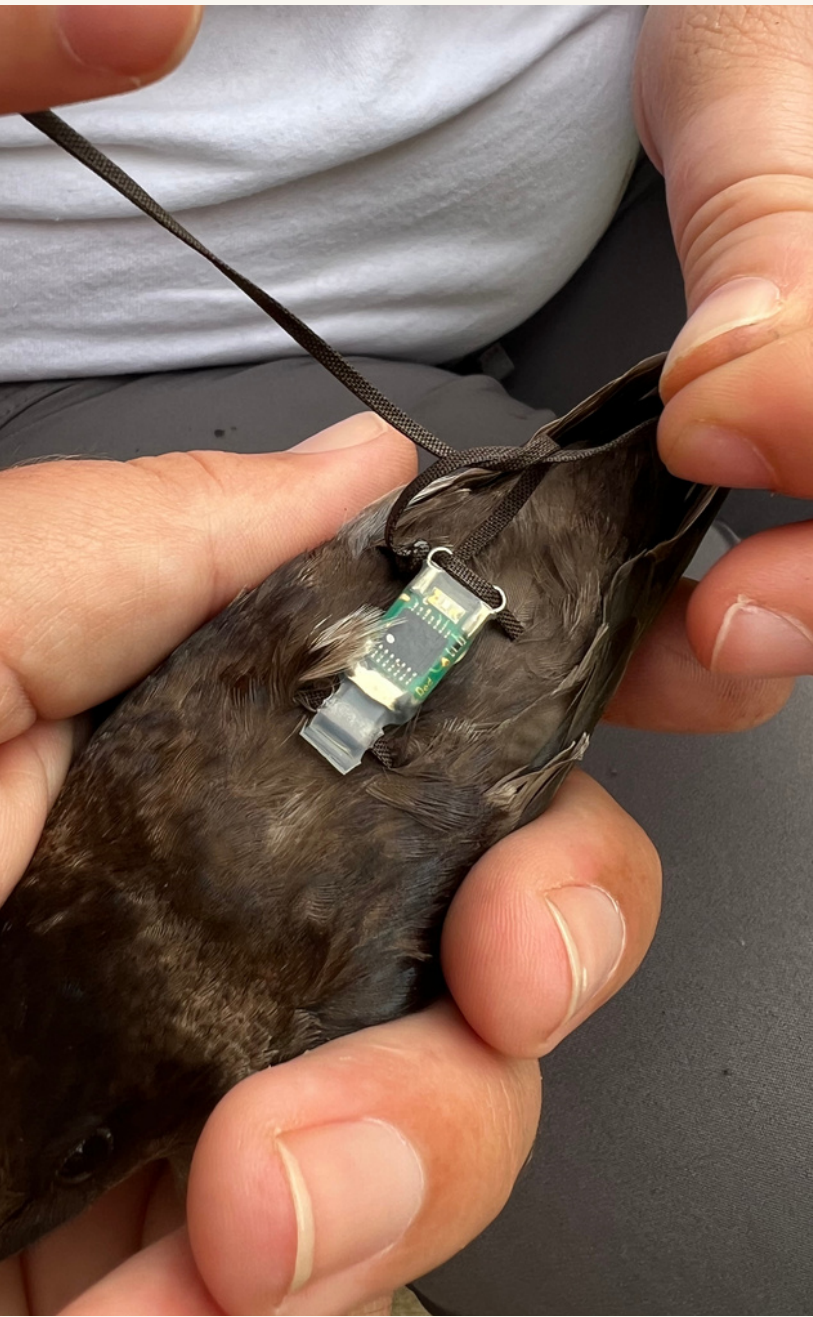
This migration banding site is going into its fourth year. It is located on 14 acres of private property smack dab in the middle of Orange Beach, AL and is closed to the public. The

focus of this site is understanding how rapid area urbanization affects migrants use of small habitats. This site has historically hosted very low numbers but an impressive array of species to include a Yellow-green Vireo, a rare vagrant along the Gulf Coast. We have a running list of flora and fauna species this habitat offers to our feathered friends. While it's likely this property is too small to sustain a large number of birds for prolonged periods of time, it does serve as a much needed stopover site for migrants as well as a roost for several heron and egret species. The current plan is to shift this site to being monitored by Autonomous Recording Units (ARUs) in 2025 to free up some of our time to focus on new projects.

Many thanks to Catherine Watterson for the continued use and access to this crucial habitat as well as her dedication to protecting this property from being developed.



Southeastern Purple Martin Project Banding and Geolocator Deployment



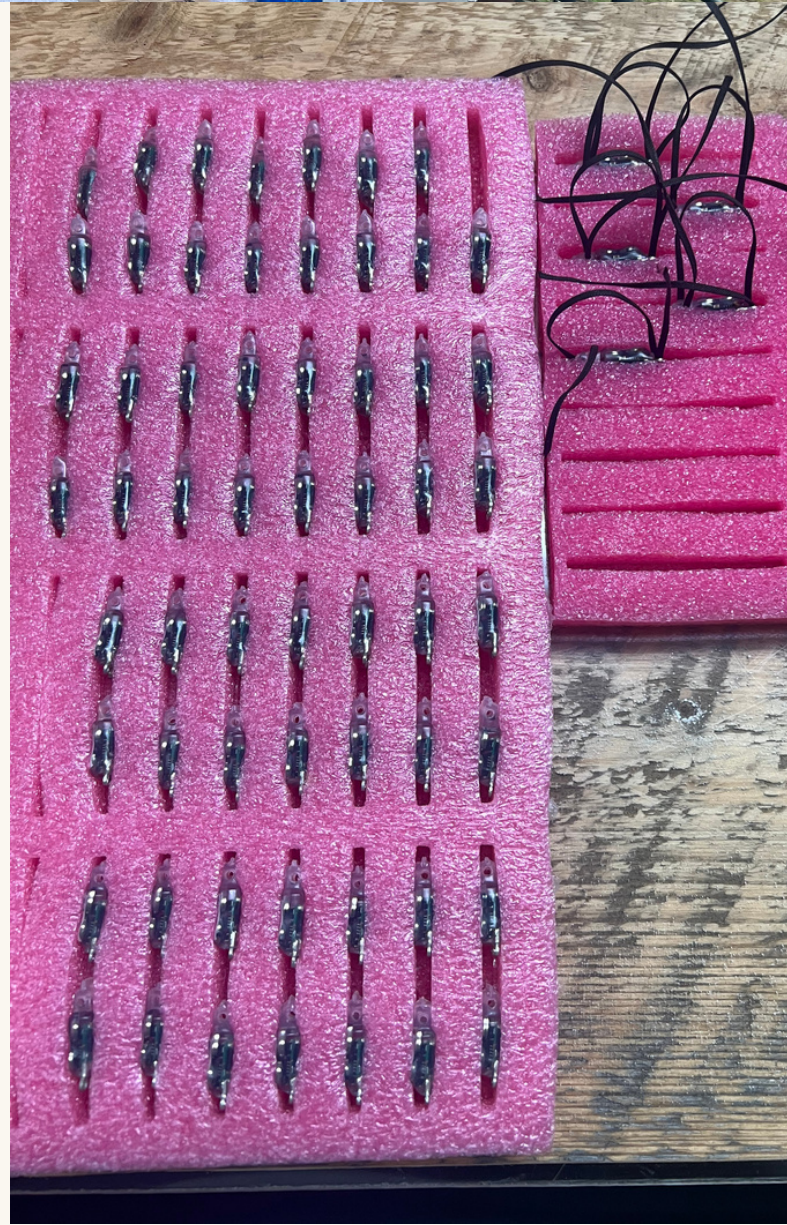
Southeastern Purple Martin Project Banding and Geolocator Deployment



What a year for Purple Martins! In more ways than one really. This was our second year for our Southeastern Purple Martin Project and it presented some challenges and raised some more questions. First we would like to recognize Brad Biddle, Tiffany Anderson, Lynn Daniel, the FWC crew (Barbara, Mackenzie, and Matt) and Debbie Kirkland for their dedication to this project as they carry the weight of this project every breeding season with their respective colonies.

This year we successfully banded 790 Purple Martins between the 5 colonies and deployed 78 geolocators. In addition, our colony landlords continued to take stellar notes during their weekly nest checks which is crucial data for determining the success of these colonies.

Some challenges this year included a Merlin actively hawking the Florida colony and widespread nestling deformities. We saw a drastic increase in under developed young this year in all colonies likely due to genetic conditions however we cannot rule out potential environmental factors that may have played a role in what we observed.



ARU Deployment

Employing new technology is something we are really excited about. In the world of research the more complete a dataset is the stronger your understanding of what is going on.

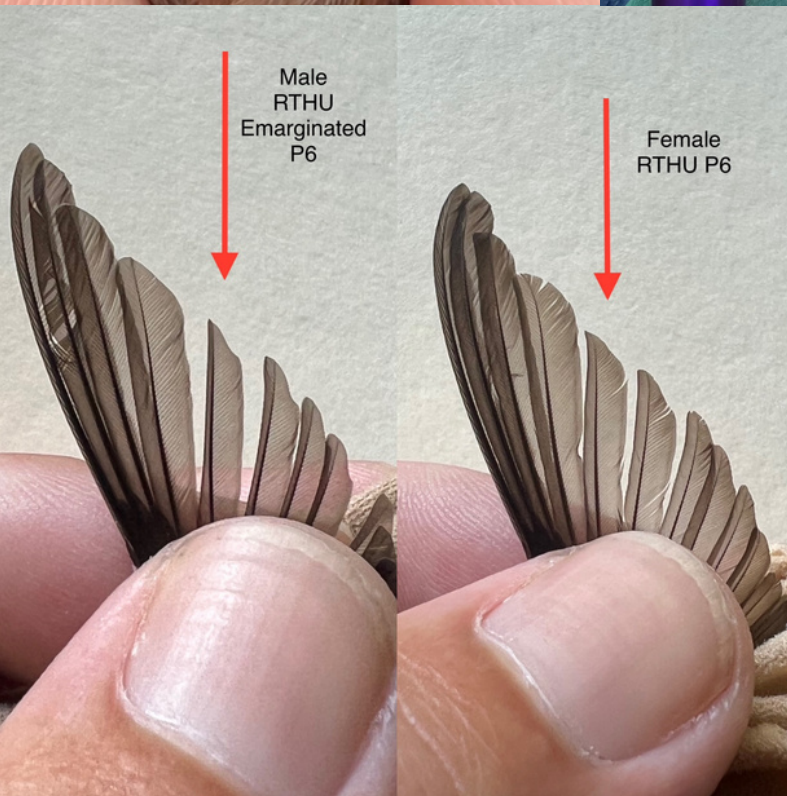
Autonomous Recording Units or ARUs are one such technology we can tap into to fill in the blanks. Since BCA is 100% volunteer run, we can only devote a certain amount of time and resources to any one project. For instance, our Orange Beach Banding Site can only be run for a week max because of our other major public events during migration seasons and our actual careers so we miss a large portion of the whole migration season. However, with ARUs, we can collect bird call data to give us some idea of what species are using or passing through/over this site all season long.



This is an Audiomoth, our current ARU. We were hoping to have some call data for you by this point but our first Audiomoth was stolen off our tower.

A new ARU has been deployed and we hope to have you some data after this next spring migration.





West Virginia and Idaho



West Virginia and Idaho



West Virginia

Training, training and more training! Kyle traveled to WV for the third year to assist Fred Dietrich and Sandy Lockerman in training four of the next generation of hummingbird banders. We banders have to start somewhere which is normally with their local Master Bander. While hands on training with your mentor is necessary to start “getting the feel for it”, Fred’s WV training sites offer an opportunity to grind through hundreds of birds.

Banding hummingbirds is hard enough but being able to band hummer after hummer for hours on end practically non-stop truly tests your limits. After 6 hours and your 100th bird, are you still aging and sexing birds correctly? Are you still exhibiting the safest bird handling skills you were at the beginning of the day? Hummer bander training tests your metal and helps prepare you for being on your own.



Idaho

Speaking of training, while Kyle was in WV training new banders, Emma was in Idaho with Fred Bassett getting continued experience with western hummers. In case you haven’t been told, a bander’s training is never over. It’s a lifelong pursuit in bettering your skills and knowledge especially when faced with more difficult species. Both Emma and Kyle band several western hummingbirds along the Gulf Coast during the winter but our exposure is limited.

We are extremely grateful to both Freds and Sandy (friends that we met during our HBSG days under the Sargents,) who have decades of experience and have banded tens of thousands of hummingbirds. Getting to spend time banding with any of them is a real treat. Everyone bands a little differently. Everyone has their own tips and tricks. Being able to access that knowledge and experience through them is invaluable as we continue our own journey.



Motus

Alabama is finally on the Motus Map!

BCA partnered with Orin Robinson from Cornell and John Dindo from the Dauphin Island Sea Lab to make this dream come true. Our motus station is located on top of the radar tower on Dauphin Island and surveys for tagged birds flying through the Mobile Bay corridor and Mobile County.

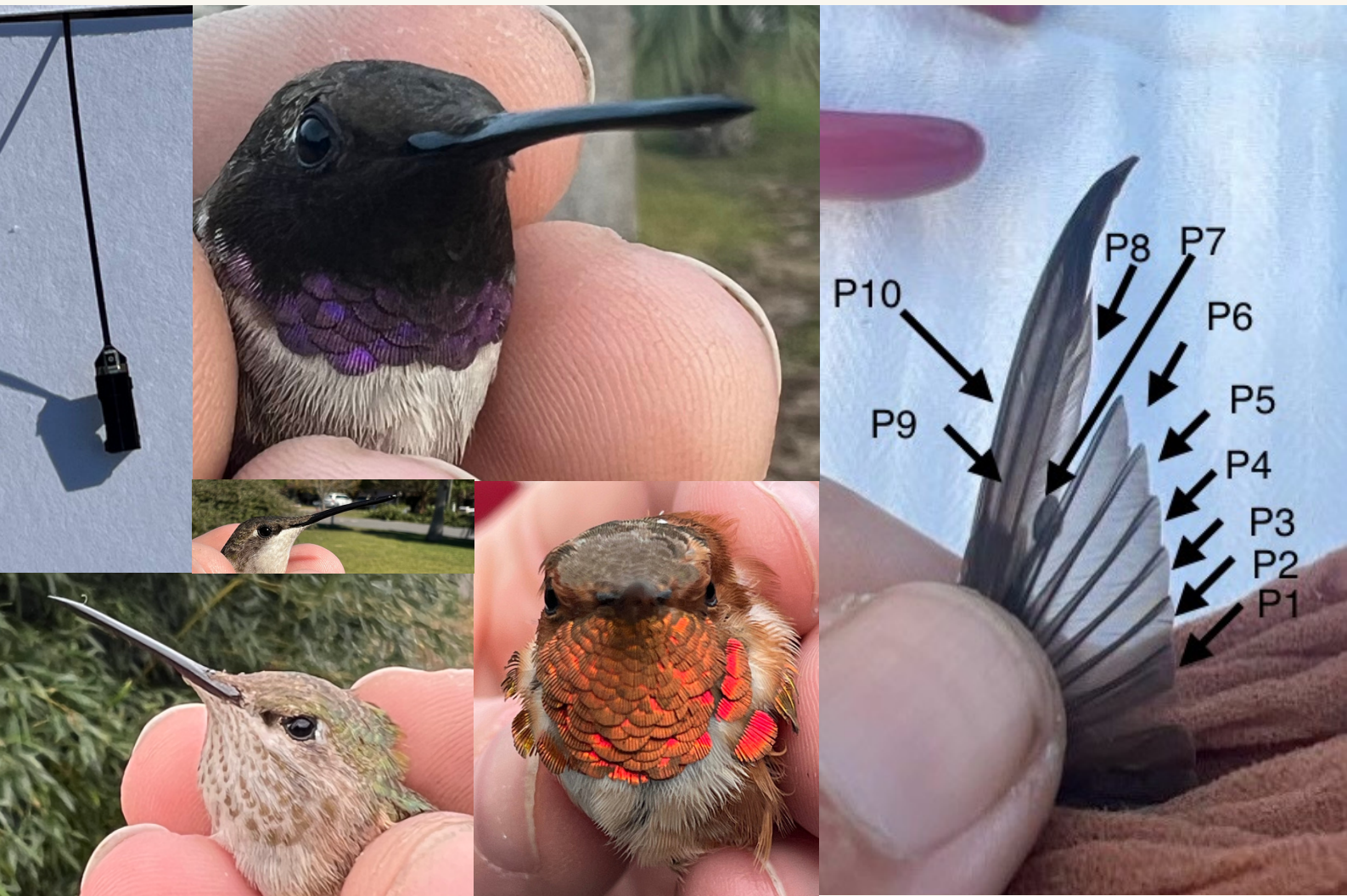
This is a big step forward for Alabama in understanding what bird populations migrate through our coastal areas as they make their way north and south each year. In addition to monitoring bird movement, this motus station opens of new possibilities for researchers at the sea lab as well. Motus isn't bird specific. Motus tags can be affixed to virtually anything that moves. For more info on Motus, you can out motus.org.



Hummingbirds- Where we are and where we are going



Banding hummingbirds and re-encountering banded individuals has been the most fruitful way of dissecting hummingbird movement during migration and while on their breeding and wintering grounds. For the longest time banding hummers and hoping to recapture them later was all we could do. This year, that changed in a big way. Cellular Tracking Technologies (CTT) produced the Blumorpho tag! Originally designed for Monarch Butterflies, these 0.059g solar tags have some real potential in the world of tracking hummingbird movement. We say potential because a whole lot of testing has to be done before we start putting tags on wild hummers. Just know that it is in the works! If you have questions about our Project HUMMER, you can email Kyle at kyle@bandingcoalition.org.



BANDING COALITION OF THE AMERICAS



FALL BANDING AT FORT MORGAN / EMMA -
KEYNOTE SPEAKER FOR BIRDFEST



Fall Banding at Fort Morgan / Emma - Keynote speaker for Birdfest



527 banded, 55 species

What a wild week this was! With a slow beginning to the week (no more than 40 birds per day) we were able to focus on educational talks and engaging with our guests. On our last day, the birds really showed up with us banding 324 birds in the span of 7 hours! Even with the massive influx of birds, we still managed to showcase the incredible species that passed through. Fort Morgan is by far our largest banding event every year. This year we saw an estimated 600 guests both from the local area and from across North America to see the amazing spectacle that is migration at Fort Morgan.

Birds of note that graced us with their presence included: Bell's Vireo, Western Wood-Pewee, and Western Tanager!

Many thanks to our devoted volunteer crew for continuing to make this work possible.

We can not thank Micah Green at [Gulf Coast Media](#) and Dodai Stewart at the [The New York Times](#) enough for helping us spread the word about our bird conservation, research, and outreach efforts. Debbie Williams with WRKG and Fran Thompson with the Mullet Wrapper also did great articles for us to spread the word locally.

Special recognition to this years sponsors: Alabama Tourism Department, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, Hummingbird Research INC, and Mobile Bay Audubon Society.

***We were also honored to have had Emma
represent BCA as this year's Keynote
Speaker for the Alabama Coastal
Birdfest!***

**Sweet Home
Alabama**



In the Media -The New York Times

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2023



Near right, tracking species that were banded over the course of nine days. Far right, Amanda Carpenter inspecting the fat content on a blue grosbeak by blowing on its breast feathers to reveal its pink skin.



Above from left, Hannah Wright, Jonathan Pérez and Emma Rhodes, one of the founders of the Banding Coalition of the Americas, setting up mist nets to catch migratory birds in September in Fort Morgan, Ala. Right, captured birds waiting to be banded. Far right, preparing to release a prothonotary warbler.



One in the Hand, Hundreds More in the Bush

In Alabama, volunteers put leg bands on scores of birds that were on a migratory layover.

Photographs by MICAH GREEN
Article by DODAI STEWART

On a map of the United States, you can barely see the skinny strip of land that is Fort Morgan, Ala. But the narrow peninsula — about 20 miles long and, in some places, less than a half-mile wide — is immensely important for migratory birds: It is the last land stop before they fly south across the Gulf of Mexico.

Recently, the Banding Coalition of the Americas spent nine days in the dense vegetation of Fort Morgan, carefully capturing birds in mist nets, fitting them with tiny leg bands and releasing them back into the world to make their long journey across the water.

By the end of the event, Emma Rhodes and Kyle Shepard, the founders of B.C.A., alongside a crew of 10 or so other trained and federally licensed volunteers, had captured and banded 527 birds from 55 different species.

Seeing the birds up close and holding them in your hand can be transformative, said Ms. Rhodes, 28, an avian biologist and Ph.D. student at Auburn University. "It can really change people's lives and give them new perspectives about why birds are important, why this habitat's important, why this habitat shouldn't just be condos," she said.

Ms. Rhodes and Mr. Shepard were trained in bird banding at Fort Morgan as youngsters, when their mentors, Bob and Martha Sargent, led a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of hummingbirds and other Neotropical migrants. The Sargents are no longer



alive, and in 2020, Ms. Rhodes and Mr. Shepard founded B.C.A. as a way of continuing the work.

Mr. Shepard, 30, began banding at Fort Morgan when he was 12. When people are interested in volunteering, he said, "my first question is, well, how much time do you have to devote to it? Because it's going to be the rest of your life — the training is never over."

Still, Ms. Rhodes added, offering people the opportunity to volunteer was important to them both. "We had the advantage and the privilege of training at a very young age and really feeling like that changed our direction and our trajectory in life for the better," Ms. Rhodes said.

The data B.C.A. collects is reported to the Bird Banding Laboratory, a program run by the United States Geological Survey that, in collaboration with the Canadian Bird Band-



ing Office, administers the North American Bird Banding Program.

Of course, birds know no borders. The species captured and released by B.C.A. are merely making a pit stop in Alabama. "A lot of times we'll say, oh, North American species, but really they're not North American species," Ms. Rhodes said. "They're all over the Americas and we're sharing them."

The team often finds some surprises in the nets. "This year we banded a Western tanager, which was not supposed to be there," Ms. Rhodes said with a laugh; the bird's typical habitat is farther west. She added, "We also banded two Western wood pewees" — again, not an eastern species.

Records the volunteers collect help scientists uncover larger trends.

The records collected by B.C.A. will help scientists find larger trends. "We could be seeing a higher occurrence of western birds every year, and that's something that needs to be documented," Ms. Rhodes said.

Ultimately, she added, one of the organization's goals is to share and exchange data with other regions: "Especially with people in the tropics, because you've got to understand the full annual cycle to conserve birds," she said. "You can't just study them in the winter."

Ms. Rhodes said she also simply enjoyed seeing birds up close, even species that are common. Among her favorites is the male American redstart, nicknamed the Halloween bird for its black and orange feathers. She associates it with Fort Morgan, especially in the fall. "We banded a lot of them," she said. They are important to the ecosystem, and to the work she has dedicated her life to, she said. But also: "They're just pretty birds."

Left, a hooded warbler shortly before its release. Above left, Mark Myers, a former curator of birds at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, banded a brown thrasher last month.

We'll be signing autographs this year now that we are famous!

Just kidding, but in all seriousness, this article made our jaws drop! The stars certainly aligned to make this happen. Becky Hire, who has taken on the role of helping us expand our media reach with news outlets among other things found Micah Green with Gulf Coast Media. With his interest peaked, Micah spent several days with us at Fort Morgan photographing our event and soaking up as much information as he could. We were determined to make an avid birder out of this Gulf Shores local.

As the days went on, Micah pitched our story to the New York Times and there was interest! Our story was published on November 14, 2023. To say this was huge is a major understatement.

Opportunities like this are a once in a lifetime thing and we are honored to have been featured.

Many thanks again to Micah Green with Gulf Coast Media and Dodai Stewart from the New York Times for making this dream a reality.

The New York Times serves more than 10,000,000 subscribers through their print and digital platforms. They also have 17.8M followers on instagram and they put us EVERYWHERE!

Other Outreach and Banding Demos

Banding Demo at Kreher Park



Class with Nature Connect Alabama



Environmental Studies Center's Open House



Hummingbird Banding Demo at Pascagoula River Audubon Center





Hawk Mountain





Hawk Mountain

John and Kyle took the opportunity to participate in Hawk Mountain's Raptor Field Techniques Course in order to glean some knowledge from the masters. This was a fantastic course that gave us some new ideas and exposure to how purely raptor devoted stations run. Though diurnal raptors were slow, Northern Saw-whet Owls were plentiful! Thanks to Becca McCabe and Bracken Brown for sharing their knowledge and we encourage anyone looking to get into raptors to check out Hawk Mountain in PA.

Major thanks to Tim Kita (one of the banders at Little Gap) for putting up with John and I for 2 extra days after the course ended. We were each able to handle and band a couple of Red-tailed Hawks under his tutelage. Tim is a great guy and is extremely passionate about his raptors. John and Kyle are already making plans to go bug him again this coming fall.

