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A Hearty Band of Volunteers Makes Hummingbirds Count

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Birders Band Tiny Creatures And Changed the Way Science Sees Them

BY NEAL TEMPLIN

HOUMA, La.—A hummingbird darts to a backyard feeder and begins sipping sugar water. Someone inside the house pushes a button, and a metal door slams shut, trapping the tiny creature.

The bird is carried a few minutes later to where Nancy Newfield sits at a kitchen counter. With magnifying lenses perched on her forehead, she uses pliers and forceps to place a numbered aluminum band on its leg. After a series of measurements, the bird is taken outside and released.

Later, Ms. Newfield serves herself a generous slice of Carnival holiday king cake from a tray on a nearby counter. “We work comfortably,” she explains.

The 68-year-old began banding hummingbirds in 1979 after she got tired of hearing that the only hummingbirds in Louisiana during the winter were lost and likely “doomed to perish,” she says. She believed that wasn’t the

case, and that some birds returned winter after winter. Many birders didn’t believe her, she says.

“The big dogs locally thought I didn’t know what I was talking about,” she recalls. “I grew up with brothers. I wasn’t going to put up with that nonsense. So I had to prove myself.”

By banding birds, she eventually was able to show that seven different species of hummingbirds regularly wintered in Louisiana.

Ms. Newfield is one of about 250 people licensed in the U.S. to band hummingbirds. They have changed how scientists view the bird, says Bruce Peterjohn, who heads the federal laboratory in Laurel, Md., that regulates bird banding. “A lot of things that are now taken for granted, 20 years ago people didn’t even know existed.”

Joining this band of banders isn’t easy. One must spend three to four days with a master bander

learning how to put the tiny bands, each of which weighs approximately two or three hundredths of a gram, on the birds, which themselves mostly weigh only three to 5½ grams. “You have to learn the touch,” says master bander Bob Sargent of Alabama, who says he has trained about 100 people in the art over the years.

Kelly Bryan, a retired state park superintendent, bands hummingbirds in West Texas, where 17 different species are found because the habitat is so favorable. “Banding hummingbirds is like opening a box of chocolates,” he says, coining a phrase. “You never know what you’re going to get when you set those traps.”

Hummingbirds, it turns out, are pretty tough critters. A few winters ago, two were found to have survived a temperature of 4 degrees below zero in Lynchburg, Va. A Rufous hummingbird was captured one winter in Tallahassee, Fla., and trapped the next summer in Alaska. “They have the ability to fly thousands of miles and come back to a house and know exactly where the feeder is supposed to be,” says Mr. Peterjohn. “For a bird with a brain the size of pea, that’s pretty amazing.”

If a hummingbird devotee is late in putting up a feeder one year, birds can make their displeasure known. “Sometimes they come look in the window, and say, ‘People, get your act together,’” Mr. Peterjohn says.

Ms. Newfield says she began serious birding after a relative gave her binoculars won in a crap game in Vietnam. In the 1970s, it was believed a few hummingbirds, mainly the Rufous, would occasionally spend winters in Louisiana instead of migrating to warmer climes, she says.

While banding, Ms. Newfield says she began spotting other species in the winter as well as documenting that the same birds would return year



after year. She captured the same Buff-bellied hummingbirds nine years in a row. Nine is old for a hummingbird.

A trip one morning this month began at 5:30 as she and three assistants drove in the darkness to Houma, an oil-patch town southwest of New Orleans. All four are unpaid volunteers.

They put up three traps around 7 a.m. next to the house of Jennifer and Alan Gibson. The four banders watched the traps from inside as the Gibsons plied them with cake and coffee. The traps had doors that

captured 10 birds. Two were previously banded while eight were new birds.

Jennifer Gibson was crushed. She had hoped to surpass last year's count, when the Newfield team trapped 18 birds on her property. "I'm all for the numbers, and they just aren't there this year," Ms. Gibson said. She plans on "pulling out all the stops next year" by planting more flowers favored by hummingbirds.

Next up was the nearby house of Duane Ring. The team nabbed seven birds there. The cloth bags holding captured birds were hung from the antlers of



could be automatically slammed shut by specially programmed car-door openers.

Within minutes the banders had captured several hummingbirds. The birds were placed in cloth holding bags to settle them down and draped on a hanger while Ms. Newfield or one of her assistants, Steve Locke, meticulously banded and measured the birds. Another assistant, Kevin Morgan, recorded all the information—part of which is eventually transmitted to the bird banding laboratory.

After taking 20 different data points, the banders placed a glob of colored liquid paper on the head of the hummingbird before releasing it outside. The colored glob, which will fall off when the bird molts, allows team members to spot previously captured birds so they won't trigger the trap.

By the time Ms. Newfield's team got ready to leave the Gibson house later that morning, they had

a hunting trophy, a red stag that Ms. Ring's husband shot in Scotland a few years ago.

The next day, the team drove a little more than an hour northwest of New Orleans to fertile hunting grounds in and around Baton Rouge. But it rained, and they trapped just 11 birds all day.

Ms. Newfield never knows what day will produce a key piece of information about the birds. In 2007, she managed to band just a single Rufous at one house. The next year that bird was captured in Langley, Wash., a traditional breeding ground for the species. It was the first time the "connection" with Washington state had been documented, she says.

"Each one is an individual, and each one has a story to tell us," Ms. Newfield says of the birds she traps. "You just put the band on and hope it is found by someone else—or [that the bird] will live for another 10 years."