



# BANDING TOGETHER

*for Birds*

Amateur birders get up close and personal with migrating species while collecting stats for a worldwide database.

BY KAREN WEIR JIMERSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTY BALDWIN

The Ruby-Crowned Kinglet is one of the smallest birds in North America. The male features a red crown that is usually hidden.



A

bird sings a prelude to sunrise on a May morning in the woods behind Bob and Connie Van Ersvelde's home outside Grinnell, Iowa. Bob works alone, unrolling mesh nets and stretching them between trees on his farm. It's Banding Day, and Bob's first order of business is to start catching birds.

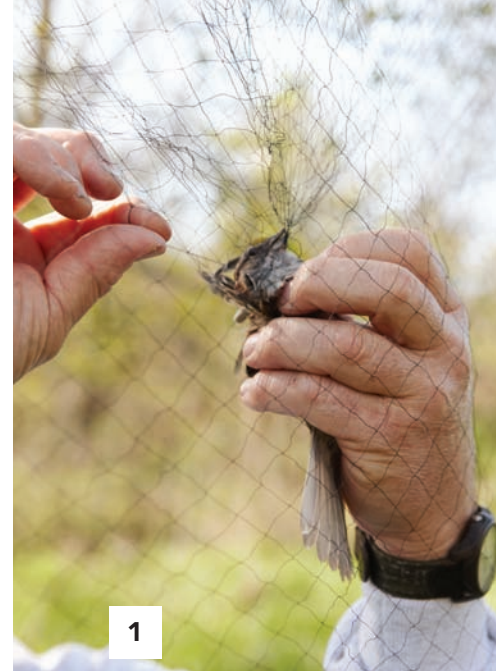


### A bird in hand

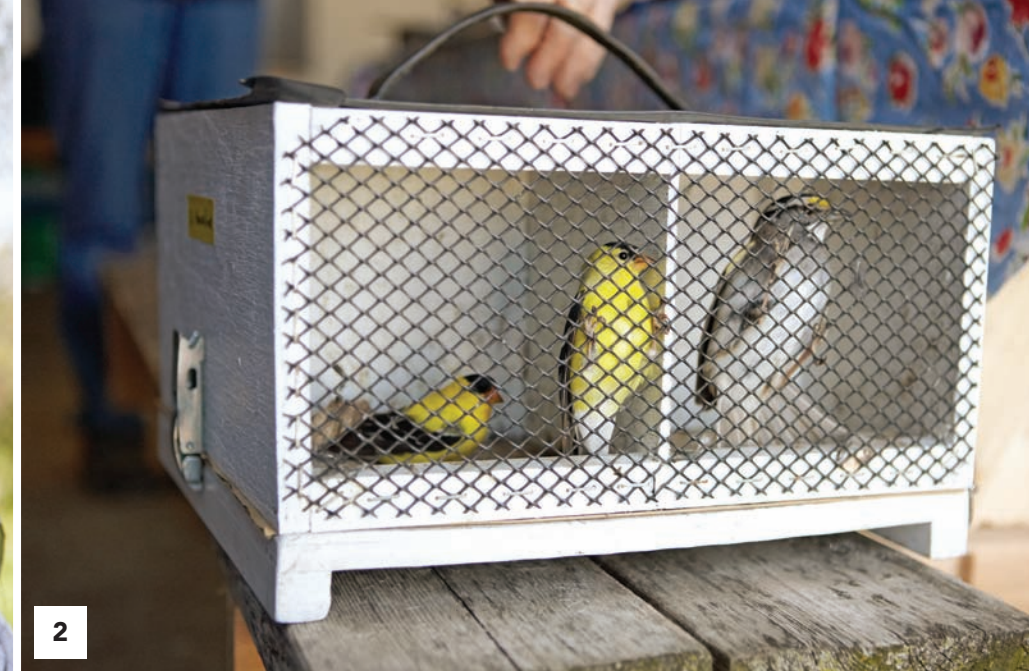
The migrating birds that stop at the Van Ersvelde farm are attracted to the rolling wooded terrain and creek (read: food, shelter, and water). They're en route to their summer destinations, where they'll breed and raise families. Bob's nets will be a brief and unscheduled stop. The birds don't see them, fly right in, and get caught harmlessly. "The early bird gets the worm," Bob says, chuckling. Here, the early bird also gets netted. A Gray Catbird struggles and squawks, a knotted-up Blue Jay scolds, a brilliant Yellow Warbler sits quietly—all safely stuck in an outstretched net.

Volunteers for the Van Ersveldes' annual bird banding arrive early, too. Some are many-year veterans of Banding Day. Others are newbies, people of all ages who are interested in birds. All are volunteer participants in the North American Bird Banding Program, an initiative through the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Canadian Wildlife Service. While fun (and educational) for volunteers, bird banding also yields important scientific data on migration, behavior, life span, population growth, and survival rates of birds. Banding Day at the Van Ersvelde farm is just one of many across North America that provide a bird's-eye view of bird populations.

**LEFT:** The see-through net is checked every 45 minutes to an hour so birds can be released for banding. **INSET:** Bob Van Ersvelde holds a male Red-Winged Blackbird whose stats and banding will help birding organizations, such as Audubon, track this species' migration, breeding, and longevity.



1



2

### Bird Banding Facts

Bird banding in the United States is controlled under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and requires a federal permit. Some states also require a state permit. Bird bands help document migration routes—and some incredible journeys. For example, the Arctic Tern makes an annual round trip of 25,000 miles.

1. An entangled bird is held safe until released by a bird banding volunteer. These specialized lightweight nets, called "mist nets," are made to catch birds humanely.
2. Two American Goldfinches and a White-Throated Sparrow wait to be banded. The boxes feature compartments so the birds don't cramp or injure each other.
3. A Red-Headed Woodpecker gets a lightweight band with a serial number.
4. Each bird is inspected for special markings. The underside of a fanned-out wing of a male Northern Cardinal shows the intricate mechanism behind flight.
5. Volunteer Ken Saunders weighs a bird, placed in a paper bag to keep it calm.
6. Stats on serial number, weight, sex, age, and special markings are recorded in a notebook. They also are sent electronically to an international database.



3



6



5



4



**THIS PHOTO:** Nature's Garden™ editor Jane McKeon holds a Northern Waterthrush that has been weighed and banded.



**ABOVE:** Bob Van Ersvelde shows new birding enthusiast Giovanni Vizcarra the wing markings on a male Red-Winged Blackbird.

At the nets, a bright Yellow Warbler draws a crowd. Warblers fly in groups, often called waves. This 5-inch-long bird is so startlingly yellow that volunteers circle it in awe. “Warblers offer a very special thrill,” Bob says. “They’re the butterflies of the bird world—they’re so colorful.” The warbler is calm as he’s placed in a box with a mesh screen front.

### *Data collection*

The first birds of the day are taken inside the Van Ersvelde’s garage, mission control for data collection and banding. A volunteer removes a bird from its box and places it in a paper bag. “It’s dark inside the bag, and the birds stay calm,” Bob says. He sets a bagged warbler on a scale, and another volunteer writes down the weight, subtracting the weight of the bag.

Only licensed banders can do bird banding. There are 2,000 master banding permits in the United States; this group’s expert is Rob Bradley. He deftly snaps a small band on the leg of a Red-Headed Woodpecker, and a volunteer writes the bird’s stats in a log. The band’s unique number “is like a license plate,” Bob says.

After the woodpecker is banded, it’s free to continue its migration. Bob hands it to a first-time birder, 12-year-

old Giovanni Vizcarra, who holds it cautiously. “We like to give newcomers a chance to hold a bird,” Bob says. “We show them how. They can hold a bird in their hand for 10–30 seconds.” When Giovanni opens his hands, the bird streaks upward into the blue sky. “It was the first time I held a bird,” Giovanni says with a smile.

The big excitement of the day is the netting of a male Red-Winged Blackbird who is already wearing a band. Quick research shows that he’s a return visitor to the Van Ersvelde farm; he was banded in 2004. The majority of netted species are what Bob calls “LBJs,” for “little brown jobs.” Sparrows, wrens, thrashers—from a distance, it’s hard to tell them apart. But when you get closer, LBJs reveal great differences.

At the end of the day, data are recorded for 178 birds, including four different warbler species. The best takeaway is this: The volunteers get to see, perhaps for the very first time, how surprisingly unique every species really is. Even a little brown job of a bird can make you a little more observant and appreciative of the birds all around us.



White-Throated Sparrow

## Want to help birds? Watch them!

There are more than 800 species of birds in the United States, and some of them are in trouble. Weather-related catastrophes such as storms, droughts, and fires destroy habitats and food supplies. Global climate change, land development, and invasive species also affect where and how birds thrive. So who is keeping an eye on all this? You can! A citizen-led conservation program called the Audubon WatchList collects critical data. Species that are declining rapidly and/or have small populations are assigned category red. Species that are declining or rare are identified as yellow. Want to help? You can collect data by participating in the annual Christmas Bird Count, the Great Backyard Bird Count, and the North American Breeding Bird Survey. To learn how you can participate, go to:

Christmas Bird Count: [audubon.org/Bird/cbc](http://audubon.org/Bird/cbc)

The Great Backyard Bird Count: [birdsource.org/gbbc](http://birdsource.org/gbbc)

North American Breeding Bird Survey: [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/)

See Buyer's Guide on page 110.



Red-Bellied Woodpecker



American Goldfinch



Northern Waterthrush



Brown Thrasher



Red-Headed Woodpecker



Ruby-Crowned Kinglet



**THIS PHOTO:** A House Wren is a small and pugnacious bird, Bob says. House Wrens live and breed throughout the United States in summer, so this tiny bird might already be home at the Van Ervelde farm.