

Leading the way, staying in touch, making the difference

FALL 10

LEGACY



FOR THE BIRDS Julie Craves ('92 B.A.), supervisor of avian research, leads a bird-banding initiative that has tagged more than 31,000 birds in an effort to understand urban stop-over sites for migrating birds.



rest-stop
HABITAT

CAMPUS A DESTINATION FOR MIGRATING BIRDS

For exhausted and hungry migrating birds, UM-Dearborn may be the ultimate rest stop.

More than 250 species have been observed on campus, lured by the surrounding 300-acre natural habitat and its bounty of insects, fruits and seeds. Understanding why they stop – and what that means about birds and our environment – is the role of the Rouge River Bird Observatory (RRBO), which was created in 1992 to explore the significance of urban natural areas to migrant, breeding and resident birds.

Now located within the Environmental Interpretive Center (EIC), the RRBO is one of the nation's few urban bird research stations.

"In our increasingly urbanized world, urban habitat fragments become more critical to birds," says Julie Craves ('92, B.A.), supervisor of avian research. "Understanding how birds use them is essential for conservation."

Information about birds is collected through year-round surveys and the biannual bird-banding project, which forms the cornerstone of RRBO's research efforts.

Through banding, more than 31,000 birds have been captured in gentle nets, examined at the RRBO, tagged with tiny aluminum bands inscribed with unique nine-digit numbers, and released unharmed. Hundreds of the same birds have been recaptured, some many times.

Such research provides important information about what constitutes a high-quality stopover site for migrating birds, and how important urban natural spaces are to species survival.

"Although they have traditionally been neglected by researchers, urban areas are important to birds," says Craves. "It's one thing to know they are present, but the next step is learning whether or not they are staying and finding the right food, or quickly leaving because the right resources are not to be found in urban sites."



The banding project is a group effort, requiring help from student, alumni and community volunteers. Those who have direct contact with capturing, tagging and releasing the birds receive special training.

Greg Norwood ('07 B.S.), a biological technician with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, served as a RRBO volunteer for six years. In addition to the valuable research collected, RRBO also provides experiential learning, he says.

"The experience was demanding and challenging, and elevated my ability to think critically and integrate the stopover ecology research at RRBO with other studies across disciplines," he says. "RRBO is the most rigorous and high-quality experience in stopover ecology and urban ecology available anywhere."

BIRD FRIENDS For more information about the RRBO, visit rrbo.org. The RRBO is supported by donations, grants and external funding. To donate online, visit rrbo.org/support.

On a recent late summer day, the gardens were lush with squash, tomatoes, watermelons, beans, herbs and an array of flowers.

"We want the children to develop a love of gardening and have a sense of empowerment knowing that they can grow their own gardens," says Lynn Hausch, an environmental studies senior who coordinates the children's program. "This is about learning that they can be self-sustainable."

An Urban Jewel

To Susko, the Natural Areas are one of the most unique features of the campus — a "rare urban jewel" that is fulfilling not only the promise to conserve the Natural Areas, but to use them for maximum educational impact.

Expansion of the organic gardens and creation of a new curriculum to help future and current teachers learn about urban farming are but two of the new projects being planned.

"We are situated in an industrial region facing difficult challenges, such as soil and water contamination, air pollution and suburban sprawl combined with a shrinking inner-city population, all of which have consequences for public health," says Susko. "Our integrated educational programs and research activities are focused on raising public awareness of these environmental issues and developing strategies for creating cleaner, healthier and more sustainable communities." **M**