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An Acadian flycatcher caught in Great Smoky Mountains National Park briefly holds the center of attention before it is banded and released from a research station contributing to the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship program, called MAPS. PROVIDED BY RICH BRYANT/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

Bird-banding program offers data at Tremont



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Guest Columnist

You never know what you'll find in a mist net. As they made the rounds one June morning this year, researchers at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont in Great Smoky Mountains National Park were surprised to find a female Kentucky warbler waiting in the webbing.

Measuring about six and a half feet high and nearly 40 feet long, these nets are made of fine mesh and used by researchers to capture otherwise hard-to-come-by data on a site's bird population. Working with licensed bird banders, Tremont regularly deploys 13 such nets as part of Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship, or MAPS, a continent-wide effort to learn more about breeding bird populations.

"There is information that can be easily gotten from birds without ever having to touch them, such as identifying them to species, but there are a few things that can only be learned if one briefly has them in the hand," said Paul Super, a licensed bird bander and science coordinator for the park.

If the Kentucky warbler hadn't gotten caught in the net, scientists may have never known that species was present at Tremont. The female warbler had a brood patch — an area of featherless skin that means she's currently raising young and that a male Kentucky warbler



A community-science volunteer removes a captured songbird from a mist net while a program participant looks on. Tremont has a dedicated group of volunteers, many of whom are licensed bird banders and all of whom possess the specialized skill and experience needed to untangle the delicate creatures from these fine-mesh nets. PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

is likely nearby. Breeding males are typically rather vocal, but nobody had seen or heard one there prior to the capture. Finding the female was "quite a surprise," Super said.

Though Kentucky warblers are relatively common across their range, they've become rare in the park, likely because their preferred habitat — forest with brushy understory — is declining in the Smokies. This was the first time the MAPS station had ever recorded a Kentucky warbler, exemplifying why mist netting is such an important tool for un-

derstanding bird populations. The park also participates in two annual breeding-bird surveys in which scientists stop every half mile or so, recording all the birds they hear or see in that spot before moving on. Roughly 40 sites are documented during each survey. These results help scientists understand how abundance is changing in different bird species. No Kentucky warblers have been recorded on these surveys "for a long time," Super said.

See **BANDING**, Page 5A

'eCourts' coming to rest of WNC

Residents will be able to access information, file documents online

Joel Burgess
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

By 2025, residents of all parts of Western North Carolina will be able access court information and file legal documents online.

The "eCourts" system, already used in many parts of the state, will expand to all 100 counties by October 2025, the N.C. Administrative Office of the Courts announced this week. That will include new online access for district and superior courts in Avery, Madison, Mitchell, Yancey and Watauga by July 2025 and Burke, McDowell and Rutherford by October of 2025.

The system went live for Buncombe County July 22.

The N.C. Business Court, a specialized part of the superior court division that handles complex and significant corporate and commercial civil cases, will also move to eCourts in 2025, though a date has not yet been specified, according to N.C. Judicial Branch spokesperson Graham Wilson.

See **ECOURTS**, Page 6A

New footage released in Trump shooting

Nick Penzenstadler, Kenny Jacoby, Josh Meyer and Chris Kenning
USA TODAY

New videos from local officials in Pennsylvania emphasize how close officers were to preventing the shooting of former President Donald Trump last month.

Several hours of videos from body and dashboard cameras, released Thursday by Butler Township, show officers rushing to the scene of a manufacturing building outside the security perimeter minutes before the shooting. Soon, a man perched on the roof of that building with an AR-style rifle would fire on a nearby Trump rally, killing one man and wounding others including Trump.

The videos further reveal the confusion, overlapping radio traffic and challenges officers had in communicating at the large, open-air event.

See **FOOTAGE**, Page 4A



Banding

Continued from Page 1A

“But if you want to be sure you know what’s going on with birds, you should be monitoring them in multiple ways,” he said.

According to Tremont Education Director John DiDiego, understanding these details about local bird populations can lead to scientific findings of global importance. Some migratory birds that breed in the Smokies have enormous ranges and spend their winters as far south as Argentina, making them “bellwether species” for emerging environmental issues across the hemisphere. A 2019 research article drawing from several long-term datasets found that the number of birds in the United States and Canada has fallen by 29% since 1970, highlighting the impact of ongoing habitat loss in the Americas.

At the Tremont station, the Kentucky warbler is one of 42 species that have been recorded in the nets over the years. Louisiana waterthrushes account for about one-third of total captures on the site. It’s optimal habitat for them, and they spend most of their time close to the river, flying at the same altitude as the nets. Birds that live primarily in the canopy, such as blue-eyed vireos and yellow-throated warblers, aren’t reflected in the MAPS data. The nets don’t reach high enough to catch them.

Common captures at the Tremont station include the Carolina wren, eastern phoebe, and wood thrush. Rarely, a cedar waxwing, belted kingfisher, or pileated woodpecker is recorded.

Each summer, the mist nets go up for six hours once every 10 days, starting in the last 10 days of May and ending in the last 10 days of August. The nets are checked at regular intervals, and experienced “bird pluckers” untangle any snared birds from the mesh. Each bird is entered into a data sheet that records everything from the state of the bird’s plumage to how much fat it carries and whether it’s ready to breed. If it has a leg band, the number is noted. If not, a new one — a lightweight, aluminum band with a unique nine-digit number — is placed on its leg.

“If we recapture banded birds, it tells us how old the birds get at our site, whether we are a ‘starter home’ from which young birds are constantly leaving for an upgrade, or whether we are



Elizabeth Davis, field programs specialist for Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, extricates a wood thrush from a mist net. This is one of 13 nets set up at Tremont on data-collection days for the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship program, called MAPS.

PROVIDED BY RICH BRYANT/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT



A boy holds up a northern cardinal captured in a mist net in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The monitoring station at Tremont has recorded 40 bird species during its 21 years of operation.

PROVIDED BY TIFFANY BEACHY/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT



A girl grins as she gets a chance to hold an American robin found in a mist net during an educational summer camp at Tremont.

PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

choice habitat,” Super said. “By marking the juvenile birds we catch and then seeing how often we recapture them, we

can get a good idea of how successful these birds are at reproducing.”

The MAPS site at Tremont has been

running for 21 out of 25 summers since 2000 and averages 84 captures per year, which is on the low side compared to other MAPS stations in North America. It’s also low compared to the MAPS station that ran at Purchase Knob on the North Carolina side of the park from 2002-2007. That site averaged 320 captures per year, high compared to other stations. Staffing considerations forced the park to close it down.

While staffing continues to be a limiting factor for the park, the Tremont MAPS station benefits from the attention of park partner Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. For years, ornithologist and ace bird-bander Tiffany Beachy ran the banding station during her tenure as Tremont’s staff scientist. She left in 2018, and now Super is training Tyler Thomas, who was hired to the position this year, to take over those duties.

Tremont also works with a cadre of highly skilled volunteers and licensed bird banders from Seven Islands State Birding Park who ensure the nets are set up and data recorded on schedule. Meanwhile, participating in MAPS

See BANDING, Page 6A

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Banding

Continued from Page 5A

presents a valuable educational opportunity for kids attending field trips and summer camps hosted at the site, as well as for summer science interns who are early in their wildlife careers.

“Banding for those folks is a big deal,” DiDiego said. “They get some significant experience. By the end of the summer, they will have helped get birds out of nets and have more of a resume in terms of bird handling and doing data entry.”

It’s also a big deal for kids, many of whom get the opportunity to hold a tiny songbird in their hands when visiting Tremont. “We’ve got so many pictures of little kids and families with young kids who just have this look of total incredulity in their eyes,” DiDiego said. “There’s this sense of wonder.”

When Tremont’s MAPS stations conclude their summer data collection later this month, it will mark the end of another season of contributing invaluable information about regional biodiversity to the international MAPS project. But beyond the fresh data and the excitement surrounding the Kentucky warbler capture, it’s the sense of wonder and curiosity inspired by Tremont’s educational programs that may have an even more lasting impact on the future of birds in the Smokies.

According to DiDiego, these are “magical” moments that participants young and old will remember for many



This female Kentucky warbler was a rare find at the Tremont bird-monitoring station. Its capture this summer marked the first time the species had been collected at the site.
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

summers to come.

“People don’t forget that moment that they were able to hold a bird in their hand and look into its eyes,” he said. “I think there’s just a supreme value in that connection.”



A scientist collects data on a recently captured Louisiana waterthrush. The plastic colored bands on its legs were placed there as part of a separate research project and intended to allow researchers to identify individual birds seen through binoculars in the field.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational prod-

ucts and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org . For information about the MAPS program, visit birdpop.org/pages/maps.php .

eCourts

Continued from Page 1A

“Millions more North Carolinians will benefit from the convenience of digital access to their courthouse in 2025 as momentum builds for statewide completion of the historic eCourts transition in the judicial branch,” Administrative Office of the Courts Director Ryan Boyce said in a July 5 announcement.

The system currently serves about half of N.C.’s population in its three largest cities and 38 counties across the coastal, piedmont and mountain regions. Officials in charge of the conversion say that the millions of electronic filings and

online records searches have slashed the amount of paper going into the court system and allowed residents access outside of normal courthouse hours, 24 hours a day, seven days week.

Specific benefits of eCourts, according to Boyce are:

- Empowering the public to access and file records with the justice system online “24/7” instead of only inside courthouses during business hours.
- Reducing travel time through shared digital access to records and remote hearings.
- Integrating with public safety systems to help court officials and law enforcement access critical information through connected applications.
- Assisting users in drafting and filing

the most common legal actions through the “Guide & File” automated interview service.

- Replacing printed forms and records with electronic workflows to save millions of sheets of paper and valuable courthouse space.
- Standardizing court business processes to promote consistency statewide.
- Introducing courthouse kiosks that provide printing, scanning, payment services and direct access to eCourts applications.

The completed rollouts, however, have not been without problems, and in some instances have violated people’s constitutional rights, according to critics and a federal lawsuit. Plaintiffs from Mecklenburg and other counties say they

were arrested on dismissed charges or held in jail after their release was granted.

In the latest filing of the case in U.S. District Court for the Middle District of N.C., Mecklenburg Sheriff Gary McFadden argued June 7 that the complaint against him should be dismissed because the system did not provide him the jail release orders.

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He’s written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Got a tip? Contact Burgess at jburgess@citizentimes.com, 828-713-1095 or on Twitter @AVLreporter. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

58

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