



Tropical Wings

Newsletter

Volume 6 · 2023

Birding Journal

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Tropical Wings



The mission of Tropical Wings is to support the Sister Parks Agreement between the National Park Service in the Upper Midwest and national parks on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica (SINAC/ACOSA) by promoting an awareness of Neotropical migratory birds and supporting habitat conservation through building relationships within and between communities at both ends of the migration.

Tropical Wings is a gathering of concerned citizens in the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The focus of Tropical Wings is the welfare of migratory birds shared between the Upper Midwest and Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula.

As a shared resource these birds play a vital role in the web of life and depend on quality habitat along and at both ends of their migration to thrive.

Tropical Wings is committed to engaging citizens in celebrating and sustaining this natural phenomenon through education and habitat preservation both in Costa Rica and the Upper Midwest.



Tropical Wings facilitates many activities as part of our mission including:

- *Engaging in habitat restoration*
- *Organizing an annual Bird Celebration in collaboration with local community groups*
- *Promoting the Sister Parks relationship and instilling an appreciation for the natural history and value of migratory birds by participating in existing community events throughout the St. Croix Watershed.*
- *Encouraging and organizing adult and student exchanges between the Upper Midwest and Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula for the purpose of education and service efforts.*



Tropical Wings

Birding Journal

By Tropical Wings President, Patty Mueller

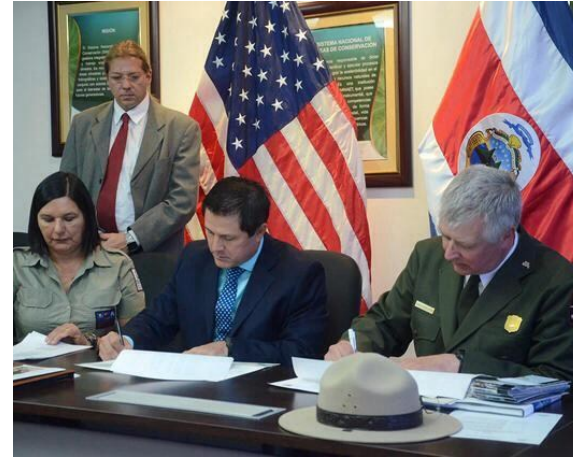
Partnerships are at the heart of Tropical Wings. From our beginning as a grassroots organization of volunteers joining together to support the idea of a partnership between national parks in the Midwest and Costa Rica, we have continued to build and rely on partnerships to fulfill our mission of supporting education and conservation for neotropical migratory birds.

Rotary International was an instrumental partner in June of 2013 when it supported three Rotarians and Chris Stein, then superintendent of the St. Croix National Riverway, on the initial nine day trip to Costa Rica where the Sister Parks agreement was then signed (right).

As we approach the tenth year of the Sister Parks agreement, we reflect with gratitude and appreciation on the many partners that have powered all that has been accomplished to ensure our shared neotropical migratory birds have vibrant ecosystems at both ends of their migration.

Several of these many partnerships are highlighted in this edition of our newsletter. Our friends and colleagues at Osa Birds in Costa Rica and Carpenter Nature Center in Wisconsin will both have Motus towers which provide researchers valuable information on migration. The Phipps Center for the Arts and Willow River Elementary school created an artistic and educational rain garden exhibit for our May Bird Migration Celebration. Eight travelers from around the country joined us in Costa Rica for our annual birdathon, raising funds that were invested in Habitat Grants in Costa Rica and the St. Croix Watershed of MN and WI. Our 2022 grantees shared their work at a roundtable event this fall, providing insights and practical suggestions to best implement the important work of habitat restoration and conservation.

We are excited for our future as we continue to support the work of habitat conservation and education of our shared neotropical migratory birds!



Bird Biographies

Connecticut Warbler | *Mysterious Birds of the Blueberries*

By TW Board Member, Brian Collins

Last September, under a clear sky of brilliant stars, a Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) had fully committed to its annual southern migration. For 48 hours, the bird would take no rests, a product not of stubborn choice but rather of high-stakes circumstance. Perhaps one of the greatest sea-faring birds, Connecticut Warblers migrate nonstop more than 1400 miles over open ocean. Failure in this feat is an exercise in feeding the fishes.

The global population of Connecticut Warblers is poorly understood, ranging somewhere between 1.5 and 4 million birds. While the estimates are based in large part on available habitat and models that take into consideration known populations and densities, a vast portion of the breeding grounds are in the roadless wilderness of boreal Canada. While just about every Connecticut Warbler is a breeding resident of Canada, there are some populations of breeding birds in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Unfortunately, all of these populations are showing the same disturbing trend of steep decline. In Wisconsin, declines between 1995 and 2019, as revealed by occupancy by Connecticut Warblers in the two Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas projects, were in excess of 70%. **CONTINUE READING ON NEXT PAGE →**



Male Connecticut Warbler
(*Oporornis agilis*)

Bird Biographies



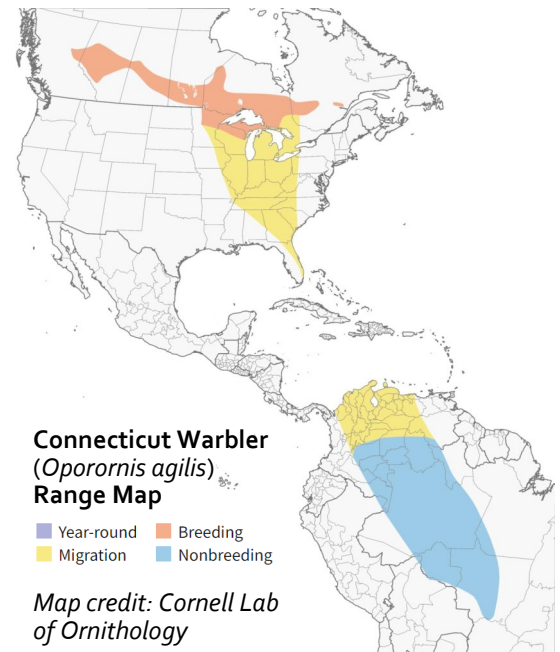
Recent studies using geolocators have shown South America's second largest forest, Gran Chaco, to be the primary overwintering site of the Connecticut Warbler. Gran Chaco is mostly in Argentina but also occupies Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil. It is an expansive forest ranging from the tropics to the warm temperate zone, and it is a true stronghold of South American biological diversity. Large scale deforestation has accelerated with nearly 20% of the forest being cleared for open-field agriculture in the last three decades. This may well be one of the culprits in the decline of the Connecticut Warbler.

Because the Connecticut Warbler is so secretive in its behavior, it is still one of the most mysterious and least understood of all birds. Despite the bird having been described to science since 1812, the unique and "run-on" complex song of the Connecticut Warbler wasn't documented until 2021, and some of the call notes and nesting behaviors are still unknown. Once numbering in the thousands in Wisconsin, it has become the rarest breeding bird in the state with only three known pairs.

Last summer, I had the honor of being the technician in charge of monitoring the breeding activities of Wisconsin's last three known pairs. In addition to falling in love with the species, I became immersed in the world of the Connecticut Warbler. I spent July of 2022 engaged in spot mapping territories, describing the avian community associated with Connecticut Warbler optimum habitat, mathematically describing optimum habitat, and determining nesting success of the three pairs.

In Wisconsin, Connecticut Warblers once occupied a combination of black spruce bogs, spruce-tamarack bogs, and, somewhat uniquely, stands of mature jack pines with a continuous ground cover of blueberry. As the populations dwindled, the jack pine forests became increasingly important to them until the only remaining pairs occupied that high-quality mature jack pine habitat. These stands are characterized by old jack pine, often more than 50 years old, unevenly spaced, with an open sub-canopy layer and almost no tall shrub layer. The ground cover of blueberry is nearly continuous, but, still, the very few taller shrubs of prairie willow and serviceberry seem to play some role. Birds common to this habitat include Eastern Wood-Pewee, Hermit Thrush, Ovenbird, Nashville Warbler, Blue-headed Vireo, and Red-breasted Nuthatch. It isn't the assortment of characters most people think of when they imagine the Northwest Sands Jack Pine Barrens!

Female and young Connecticut Warblers spend nearly 99% of their time beneath the low shrub layer, and, in Wisconsin, their activities are almost completely concealed by a continuous carpet of blueberry bushes. Gathering data on breeding success is very difficult, as their lives are more like forest mice and less like the usual wood warbler species. Females and fledglings are able to forage for caterpillars by walking along the ground, fluttering up to the underside of blueberry bushes. Thankfully, the crisp, clear notes of the male's song are detectable to nearly a half mile, and territorial males sing nearly continuously in the morning hours from mid June until mid July. The songs of the males allowed me to find the territories and spend enough time in each territory to determine that all three males were mated. Over the course of a month, the accumulation of observations revealed more and more about the mysterious lives of these Connecticut Warblers. By late July, it was quite clear that all three pairs had fledged young! Hopefully, all six adults and their young of this year will see safe travels to and from their wintering grounds in the Gran Chaco!



Top left: Brian holds a blueberry he harvested from the carpet of thick ground cover.
Top right: The entire Wisconsin breeding population of Connecticut Warblers resides in Jack Pine habitat. Middle: Connecticut Warblers breed in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and southern Canada. They undertake a remarkable migration across the Caribbean to reach their overwintering grounds in South America.

Osa Partners Updates

Motus Wildlife Tracking System By TW Secretary, Nina Koch

Tropical Wings' partner in Costa Rica, Osa Birds: Research and Conservation, is currently in the process of installing a Motus Tower in Ranch Quemado on the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica. Carpenter Nature Center has Motus Towers on both its Wisconsin Campus in Hudson and its Minnesota Campus in Hastings, Minnesota. Tropical Wings helped to fund both the Rancho Quemado and the Carpenter Nature Center's Motus Towers.

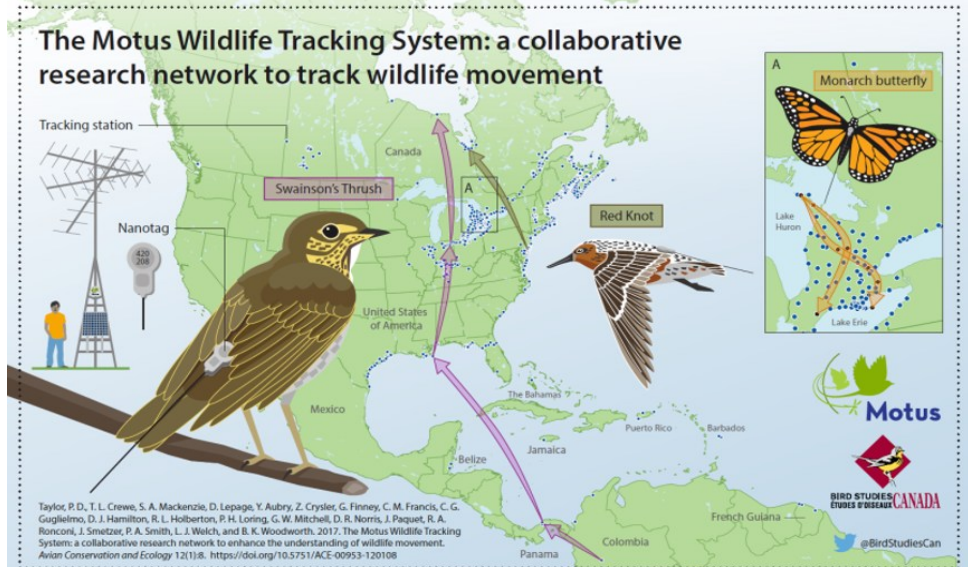
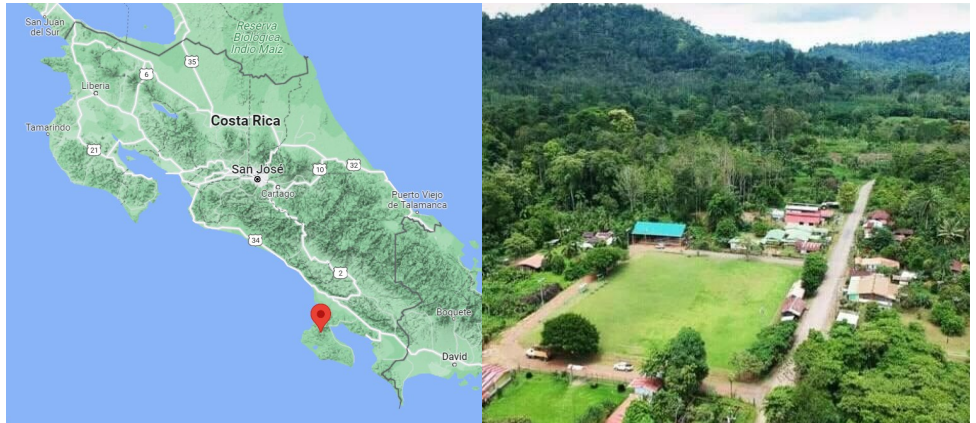
The Motus Wildlife Tracking System (Motus) has towers all over the world. Researchers fit small lightweight radio transmitters (nanotags) on animals such as birds, bats and large insects. These animals that have been tagged can be detected by the tower within a 15 mile radius. The tagged animals, through automated radio telemetry, use receivers that automatically record signals from radio transmitters. Information is shared by Osa Birds local staff on a periodic regular basis and accessed by all Motus users in the network. The data is used to learn about the movements and behavior of small flying animals.

Osa Birds will not only be hosting a tower to pick up signals of birds tagged elsewhere, but will also be tagging Swainson's Thrush, a very common passage migrant through the Osa Peninsula during spring migration. Migration movements will connect Osa to the final destination of each individual tagged thrush adding vital information to the species migration ecology including stopover sites so that critical conservation actions can be developed amongst partners.

Top: Located in the Riyito River Valley within the mountainous landscape of the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve, Rancho Quemado is a rural community focused on sustainable agriculture and ecotourism. Due to the high biodiversity of the habitat, there are several wildlife research teams that operate in the area.

Middle: Using nanotags, receiving towers, and automated radio telemetry, the international Motus Wildlife Tracking System helps us understand movements of many flying animals.

Bottom: The Motus towers (like the one at the Carpenter Nature Center Wisconsin Campus) have multiple antennae to cover wildlife movement in four directions; north/south, east/west, northeast/southwest, and northwest/southeast. Each antennae has a separate, corresponding data cable.



You can access information about tower locations and view wildlife data by visiting motus.org.

Partner Profiles

It takes cooperation of many organizations to protect migratory birds and conserve the ecosystems on which they rely. Tropical Wings partners with many entities throughout the St. Croix Watershed that perform vital conservation and education services for the animals and people of our community.



Immersive Rainforest Exhibit

By TW Board Member, Anastasia Shartin

This spring, as the neo-tropical migratory birds were arriving in the St. Croix River Valley from their Southern winter homes, Tropical Wings supported Hudson-based artist Lana Sjoberg to work with students at Willow River Elementary School to transform the Atrium Gallery at the Phipps Center for the Arts in Hudson, Wisconsin, into a tropical rainforest environment in celebration of the avian arrival.



Using cardboard, paper, paint, polar fleece, and recycled materials, together they re-created the trees, plants, and flowers found in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula. Students in kindergarten and 1st grade made leaf-cutter ants that "climbed" in a line up a tree with the flip of a switch! 3rd graders used pipe cleaners, cereal boxes, seed pods, googly eyes, and their imaginations to create whimsical insects; 2nd graders folded dozens of origami frogs; and Lana added snakes she had sewn from fleece, as well as a papier mache tapir saved for more than 20 years from a rainforest she made with Willow River Elementary School students when her oldest son was a student there; but the environment really came to life when, on May 12, 2022, the 4th graders "migrated" from their school to the Phipps with their handmade birds.



Steven Arthur Johnson Photography

Each student had created their bird modeled on one of the species known to migrate from the Osa to our region. Making this model was one of several ways the 4th graders learned about these birds. Tropical Wings volunteers met with the students to teach them about the birds, migration and the importance of protecting our local habitat to provide a safe place with food and water for them to nest over the summer months. Their teachers integrated this project into several subjects throughout the curriculum to deepen their students' learning experience. In addition to the life-size birds they made for the rainforest, the 4th graders also wrote short essays about, drew pictures of, and composed poems inspired by the bird species they had chosen.

This immersive artful rainforest environment, which included an audio recording of birds in the Osa made by a Tropical Wings volunteer, remained on view throughout the summer. It captured the imaginations of thousands of people

who visited the Phipps, including Summer Arts Camp students ages 3 through 18 and their families. The rainforest raised awareness about the migratory birds and about Tropical Wings. As part of the reception for several galleries exhibits opening at the same time, Tropical Wings held its annual Bird Migration Celebration event where the 2022 Habitat Grant recipients set up tables with information about their organizations, grant projects and actions everyone can take to protect the migratory birds.

Special thanks to 4th grade teachers Sarah Brackemyer and Katie Zehren; art teacher Hannah Heimer; principal Susan Hellmers; Tyler Fouks and Christopher Sjoberg for technical assistance with the mechanism for the leaf cutter ants; Nina Koch for the audio recording; and the following community members for their painting and installation assistance: Judy Freund, Janice Johnson, Anastasia Shartin, Roy Sjoberg, and Margaret Welshons.

To watch a video of the 2022 rainforest exhibit at the Phipps, go to www.tropicalwings.org.

Habitat Heroes

A Habitat Hero is a person or organization that has an extraordinary understanding of the importance of habitat protection, and a vision for implementing activities to raise awareness and build knowledge about conservation efforts.

2022 Habitat Grant Recipients By TW Treasurer, Judith Freund

Each year Tropical Wings awards grants to organizations working to restore or set aside important habitat for birds, pollinators and wildlife. Our current Habitat Heroes are these – and other – small organizations that are making a difference one small step at a time. There were five grant recipients in 2022. The environmental education outreach by the Deer Park Public Library – Deer Park is the smallest municipality in Wisconsin to have its own library – should be an inspiration to all of us in terms of what we can do to advocate for the planting of native plants. Wolf Creek Cemetery – this tiny space in rural St. Croix Falls – is garnering national attention in the industry for their work to add pollinator-friendly spaces in and around the land. Sustainable Stillwater and the city of Marine-on-St. Croix are modeling public and private collaboration. Jackson Meadows Homeowners demonstrate that individuals can have a positive impact in their local area.

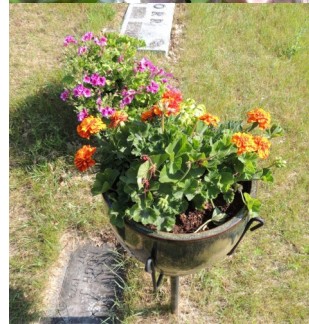
The pressures on the environment are daunting. The seeming disinterest in tackling environmental problems by our lawmakers can be disheartening. And the enactment of policies that abuse our planet by state and national legislation can almost immobilize us. But the steady and persistent efforts of a small number of individuals taking on local problems, like the 2022 grantees, should inspire and nudge all of us to ask “and what can I do?”

At the Annual Fall gathering we heard about the efforts of these groups in an inspiring roundtable discussion. Maybe YOU will be the catalyst for a local group of doers that just might be one of next year’s habitat grantees AND a Habitat Hero.

Top: Habitat conservation projects supported by Tropical Wings benefit many species of animals, including pollinators like this Aphrodite Fritillary Butterfly. Middle: Wolf Creek Cemetery is encouraging the planting of live flowers instead of using artificial arrangements. Funding from Tropical Wings helped to supplement their plans to make the cemetery a more inviting place for wildlife by introducing live plants, bird houses and feeders, and bird baths. Bottom: Tropical Wings Treasurer Judy Freund presents the grant check to Wolf Creek Cemetery.



Nina Koch



Wolf Creek Cemetery



Acknowledgements

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Membership

Tropical Wings is a non-profit 501c3 organization composed of volunteers supporting education and conservation for Neotropical Migratory birds through the Sister Parks Agreement between National Parks in the Upper Midwest and Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula.

Join our efforts today by making a contribution and becoming a Tropical Wings Member!

Contribution Levels

Hummingbird

\$15 (Students & Seniors)



Warbler

\$35 (Individuals)

Osprey

\$50 (Households)



Falcon

Donations > \$50

Membership Benefits

- ✧ Subscription to the annual Tropical Wings Newsletter ✧
- ✧ Advanced notice of birding and conservation events ✧
- ✧ Priority registration for the Costa Rica Bird-a-thon Trip ✧

To become a member, please complete the membership form and mail with payment to:

Tropical Wings, Inc.

2107 Chestnut Dr.

Hudson, Wisconsin, 54016

Thank You to our Members

Your contributions help to support international migratory bird education and habitat conservation!

Nanci Olesen—Thank you so much for your donation in honor of

Nina Koch, Barb Francis, and Deb Sussex!



• Looking for a quick, convenient giving option? Scan the QR code to make a donation through PayPal!



CONTRIBUTION LEVEL:

- ☐ Hummingbird—\$15 (Students & Seniors)
- ☐ Warbler—\$35 (Individuals)
- ☐ Osprey—\$50 (Households)
- ☐ Falcon—Contributions > \$50
Amount: \$ _____

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