



## Taverns in the Green

**T**ourist traps abound in New York City, siphoning their patrons' time and resources. But netted traps set by WCS biologist Chad Seewagen (left) catch savvy travelers: migratory songbirds. These visitors are here on business—Eat. Fly. Eat. Fly. Eat. Fly. But before the birds go, Seewagen wants to check if their stay was worthwhile, whether the city's parks are adequate dining destinations.

Like Cracker Barrels on I-95, woodland areas along the East Coast feed migrants for the next leg of their journey, but between these cafeterias, there is often a lot of pavement. From Canada to the Caribbean, eastern cities and their suburbs have spread down the Atlantic flyway. To birds, urban parks are green oases peeking through blocks of dangerous glass buildings and busy streets. Still, Seewagen wondered if these pit stops are too crowded or degraded to provide the birds with sufficient insects, worms, and seeds.

“Central Park is world famous for bird-watching. And that is great. People have been paying attention to them for a hundred years,” he explains, “but no one has ever asked, ‘Well okay, they are here, they are stopping in these parks, but how are they doing?’”

So in 2004, Seewagen and fellow WCS ornithologist Eric Slayton designed a bird-monitoring program. In collaboration with Christopher Guglielmo of the University of Western Ontario, they track the birds' ability to plump up throughout the day. Each spring and fall, fine nets stretch eight feet up from the ground in Bronx Park, Manhattan's Inwood Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and two reserves in Westchester County.

JULIE LARSEN/WWF/WCS (2)



Nearby stands Seewagen or Slayton, waiting for a yellow-rumped warbler, a northern waterthrush, or any other of the eight study species to fly into their research web.

As quickly as possible after capture, the scientists take a few drops of the bird's blood, measure its wing length (above), weigh it, band it, assess visible fat deposits on the

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underside of its throat, and release it. Blood tests will reveal the extent to which the birds are storing or burning fat.

Although these winged wayfarers may flap for up to 200 miles each night, they are not landing in the city emaciated. And, after a day in the park, they aren't leaving that way, either. "We are finding a nice positive relationship in that the birds we are catching early in the morning are thinner and lighter than the birds we are catching later," he says.

Whether it's a bird species that dines in the canopy or the leaf litter, it seems to find bountiful forage. "[It's] not what we expected," says Seewagen. "Hopefully that's what is go-

ing on in more southern parts." Similar studies are taking place in Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Chattanooga.

By the end of 2009, Seewagen will have examined enough birds to more fully rate New York's avian hospitality. He also plans to evaluate the amounts of insects in each park and see how certain bird species fare in the city in relation to Westchester.

"If I had a few million dollars, I'd have fifty study sites—urban and non-urban, with totally invasive plants and totally native plants, and large and small forests—every kind of situation," says Seewagen. "That's really the only way to find the optimum habitat."

Until such five-star accommodations can be determined, he is learning that these out-of-towners aren't lightweights. "They are just little machines, programmed to do whatever they have to do to find food, pack it on, and go."

*Melissa Mahony*

## Correction

In "Desert Elephants" (Wild Places, February 2008), the skydiving vultures in Namibia that Margaret Shakespeare watched overhead were incorrectly identified. They were lappet-faced vultures.