

Keeping Tabs On Feathered Waistlines

WHILE crowded restaurants in the theater district provide ample evidence that New York's human tourists are getting plenty to eat, two ornithologists working for the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo have been wondering if the city's winged visitors are getting their fill, too.

Every spring and fall, as migrating songbirds make their way up and down the East Coast along the Atlantic Flyway, legions of them touch down, famished and exhausted, in the city's parks. Their mission is to pack as much fat as they can onto their tiny bodies, storing enough energy to allow them to continue their migration.

"They can really increase their body mass by sometimes 20 percent or more in one or two days," said Chad Seewagen, a strapping 26-year-old redhead. "That's like you or me putting on 40 pounds in two days."

But though such prodigious weight gain is the birds' goal, Mr. Seewagen added, nobody has ever formally evaluated how effective the city's parks are as bird cafeterias.

So along with Eric Slayton, his older brother, he has been conducting a pilot bird-monitoring program to essentially chart the heft of songbirds like warblers, thrushes and vireos.

"Let's go check the nets," Mr. Slayton said to his brother early one morning last week as they roamed through wooded zoo grounds inside Bronx Park.

Near the muddy bank of the Bronx River, Mr. Seewagen spotted two little brown-and-yellow birds caught in a fine, nearly invisible mesh strung between two poles like a volleyball net. He delicately freed the birds and slipped each one into an individual cotton bag.

"Two yellow palm warblers, one a recapture," Mr. Seewagen said, noting that the right leg of one bird wore an aluminum band the brothers had placed on it five days earlier.

On the railing beside a path, Mr. Seewagen carefully hung his two bags from a belt rack he had taken from his bedroom closet. Mr. Slay-



Chad Seewagen, top, with a winged tourist who stopped by Bronx Park. Also visiting were an ovenbird, above, and a palm warbler, below left.

ton, whose matted brown hair somewhat resembles a bird's nest, gingerly removed a palm warbler from its bag and held the bird in his cupped hand.

Leaning almost close enough to kiss it, he blew on the little bird's throat, causing its yellow feathers to separate and reveal its semitransparent skin, beneath which yellow fat was visible. The fat that songbirds store in this area serves as a sort of fuel tank for their migratory flight, and so the two brothers visually evaluate each bird's fat content on a six-point scale.

"That's a four," Mr. Slayton said, noting that the warbler had earned a more slender rating of two when it was captured the week before.

Mr. Slayton then placed a tube on a scale and put the warbler inside, headfirst, with its tail feathers poking out. The bird, he discovered, had increased its body mass by more than 15 percent, a gain consistent with early findings of the study, which suggest that the park is indeed a terrific place for songbirds to fatten up on insects, fruits and berries.

"I bet that bird leaves tonight," Mr. Slayton said. "Adios!"

He lifted the tube off the scale and the palm warbler shot out into the bright spring morning. By nightfall, the bird would likely be headed toward its breeding ground up in New England or Canada; but until then, it still had 10 hours to gorge on New York's cuisine.

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Photographs by Angel Franco/The New York Times

How nutritious are the city's parks? Ornithologists are studying migrating songbirds to find out.