

Nicaragua Connection

Diane Allison

Little did I know the amazing journey that I was about to uncover. Where did he come from? How far had he traveled? These were just some of the questions that flooded my mind as I cradled the small frozen bundle of feathers in my hand.

The story began for me back in May 2011, when Ted Greening of Erwinna (Tinicum Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania) came to me one Sunday after church and told me about a Wood Thrush that had hit his window and died the week before. What he told me next was very exciting — the bird had leg bands, one silver federal band and two plastic bands, one yellow and one purple. Most of Tinicum knows me as the “Bird Lady.” Ted, very familiar with my obsession with birds, wanted to know if I could find out anything about the bands and this bird’s history. I told him I could, and that if he gave me the bird, I would research its background.

Summer came and went without Ted and I getting together, and the bird’s past was frozen in time with him. As September rolled around and the fall migration began, my mind went back to the bird that had not made it through the spring migration. I called Ted to see if I could get the bird and begin the search for information. He brought it by that evening, and I immediately went to the Bird Banding Laboratory site to fill out a report on the silver federal band with the number 2301–15616. Then I began an internet search for Wood Thrush Research Projects and several came up. On reading through one of them, there was a photo of a Wood Thrush with similar plastic bands, part of a project in Veracruz, Mexico. There was an email address for Matt Jeffery, Audubon Senior Program Manager for the International Alliances Program. I sent an email describing the colors and sequence of the bands and asked if this was one of his study birds; and if it was not, did he have any ideas for finding the responsible researcher.

To my amazement, he answered my email in less than 24 hours and told me that it was not one of his

birds, but that he would do some checking and get back to me. By the next day, another email awaited me from Matt. He told me that he had tracked down our bird and learned that it had been banded at Reserva El Jaguar, a shade grown coffee finca (farm) in Jinotega, Nicaragua on February 14, 2011. He told me it was part of a study on wintering site fidelity. Wow — Nicaragua. That’s about 2,000 miles one way from here; furthermore, his flight there and back would have included a 500 mile nonstop flight each time across the Gulf of Mexico. This bird was an adult when he was banded, thus he had made the trip down and back in 2009–10 and again in 2010–11 at least, perhaps more if he was older than 2 years.

Being an avid birder, I know about neotropical migrants and their amazing journeys each spring and fall from their North American breeding grounds to the tropics and back. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird flying nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico, the tiny Blackpoll warbler making an unbelievable 2,000 mile trip over water and a total of more than 5000 miles to its winter home in South America, and our nesting Bobolinks that spend the winter in Argentina — all are examples of the wonders of migration. Migration is truly an amazing and mysterious phenomenon. But somehow this Wood Thrush made it even more real and more amazing.

That was not to be the end of the story. Several days later Matt sent me two photos of Liliana Chavarr’a-Duriaux holding this very bird, taking measurements, and entering the data. What are the chances that they had a photo of this very bird going through the process? Liliana and her husband George owned the shade grown coffee finca where the research was taking place, and they assisted in the project. Reserva El Jaguar (www.jaguarreserve.org) is a wonderful winter habitat for Neotropical migrants. Shade grown coffee keeps the forest canopy in place and therefore provides valuable wintering habitat for the birds that nest here and spend their winters in Mexico and Central and South America. Their family has owned this farm for

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over 50 years, and their foresight in taking care of their property has benefited the birds greatly. This Wood Thrush who hatched in our northern woods spent the winter in the beckoning forests of their farm. When spring came, he began an epic journey north — back to the land of his birth to complete the circle.

This was “big stuff.” According to a blog entry by Curtis Smalling of North Carolina Audubon, one of the project’s funders: “In the 60 year history of the Bird Banding Laboratory, 346,359 songbirds have been banded south of the US. Of those birds, only 81 have ever been recovered in the US during the breeding season. Of those 81 records, only three birds were Wood Thrushes, including this bird. The other two Wood Thrushes had been banded in April meaning they were probably already on their way north when banded. So the Bucks County bird is likely the first Wood Thrush banded where it wintered and recovered where it was breeding (ncaudubonblog.org/2011/10/a-rare-bird-indeed/.)” The bird was picked up by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and transported to the Smithsonian where they will do further research on it and prepare a full mount for display.

As word of the find traveled around the country, Curtis Smalling contacted me with an invitation to

join members of the North Carolina Audubon on a trip to Nicaragua. I could meet Lili and her husband George and see the place where our Wood Thrush spent the winter. I jumped at the chance to make the same journey in a jet that the Wood Thrush makes each spring and fall under its own power. Lili and I were fast friends when we met. We shared a deep love of birds and a concern for their future. Lili and George have worked tirelessly to carry out bird studies at their coffee farm and to teach their neighbors in rural Nicaragua about the importance of a healthy environment. They have also trained and employed local young people to help them mist net, band, and keep records for the project. Many North American breeding birds actually spend more months of the year in Nicaragua than they do here in the US; as a result, what happens in their winter habitat is very important to their health and well-being.

Nicaragua is a beautiful country. With about 40% forest cover, 17% of its land protected, and many different habitat types, it is a very diverse country. In the space of 10 days, we observed 224 species of birds, including such rarities as Three-wattled Bellbird, Highland Guan, Black-headed Trogon, and the stunning national bird, the Turquoise-browed Motmot. Nicaragua is highly under-birded. There are over 700 species on the country’s list, but more are being discovered every day. While conditions are still rustic, the people are wonderful and are anxious to share their wonderful natural resources with us. I would encourage birders to consider a trip to Nicaragua, as your travel dollars will go a long way in Nicaragua toward conservation of “our” breeding neotropical migrants. By far, the highlight for me was a day spent with Lili, George, and the team at their banding site in the forest. This involved stringing mist nets in openings in the forest and then waiting for the birds to fly into them. The nets are checked frequently. Captured birds are carefully removed from the nets, placed in a mesh bag, and taken to the banding station. At the station, the birds are weighed, measured, banded, and released as quickly as possible. They captured two Wood Thrushes while we watched. This year, in addition to the colored plastic bands and the federal band, each Wood Thrush was being fitted with a tiny geolocator. These small devices are strapped onto the back of the Wood Thrush. It has a little photo cell and a data chip. With each sunrise and sunset, it will record



Photo courtesy of Liliana Chavarría Duriaux

Liliana records the data and band information for the bird.



Photo: Diane Allison

Wood Thrush equipped with a geolocator which was placed on this bird in February 2012. They will try to recapture this bird in the winter of 2013 and learn of its travels each day for a year.

a longitude and latitude location. Next winter when the Wood Thrushes return to El Jaguar, they hope to recapture them, remove the geolocator, place the chip into the computer and download the daily locations of the bird for the entire year. Since Wood Thrush populations are declining, it is important to know where they are spending their time, thus providing useful guidance on how to halt this decline. On that day, they also captured several other birds that spend their sum-

mers with us here in North America including: Wilson's Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Indigo Bunting. The Louisiana Waterthrush captured that day was a recapture; it had been banded in July in El Jaguar which meant this bird arrived in our area in late April to nest and had already returned to its wintering grounds by the end of July. This was more proof that many neotropical migrants spend more time on their wintering grounds than here in North America.

In the winter of 2013, they were able to recapture four of the Wood Thrushes that were equipped with geolocators in 2012. These recoveries all confirmed our region as the destination for the Wood Thrushes wintering in El Jaguar. These recoveries have also given researchers valuable information on the pathways taken by each bird — information that may be useful in helping to ascertain the causes of decline in the Wood Thrush population. If we know the places that are

valuable to the Wood Thrush in winter, on its breeding grounds and points between, we can act to conserve these areas, so that we can continue to hear the beautiful song of the Wood Thrush each spring.

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