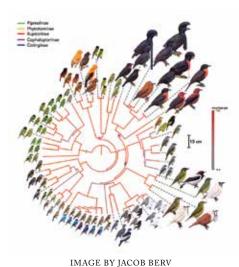


# **SCIENCE**

"OUR PROMISE, AND OUR OBLIGATION, IS TO BE OF SERVICE TO THE FIELD OF ORNITHOLOGY AROUND THE WHOLE WORLD." —director John W. Fitzpatrick, speaking at the International Ornithological Congress in Tokyo, Japan, in August 2014



# THE COTINGA TREE OF LIFE

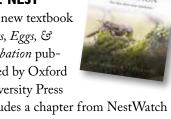
Cotingas are a tropical family of the brightest, loudest, oddest-looking, and least-understood birds on the planet. Findings by Cornell graduate student Jacob Berv and colleagues, published in October 2014, show that all 60+ species of this amazingly diverse family evolved from a common ancestor. No previous attempts to study the evolutionary history of Cotingas included genetic samples from nearly all of the existing species.

# THE INVISIBLE HAND OF **BOREAL BIRD IRRUPTIONS**

Cornell Lab researcher Walt Koenig and colleagues discovered how rainfall and temperature patterns are driving cycles in conifer tree seed production that trigger massive irruptions of Pine Siskins. Their findings, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, relied on a treasure trove of siskin sightings from Project FeederWatch dating back to 1989.

# **SCIENCE AT** THE NEST

The new textbook Nests, Eggs, & Incubation published by Oxford University Press



includes a chapter from NestWatch about the role of citizen science in studying avian reproduction. The chapter draws on NestWatch's rich 50-year history and looks ahead to future citizen-science imperatives.

# **HUMMINGBIRD HOPSCOTCH**

Hummingbirds play migratory hopscotch—jumping from one high-quality food site to the next, instead of following a fixed route. Cornell Lab scientist Frank La Sorte analyzed data from more than 300,000 eBird checklists to produce maps of the year-to-year variation



CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD MIGRATIONS FROM EBIRD DATA 2008-2013; PHOTO BY JERRY TING

in migratory routes for five hummingbird species. Because they have the flexibility to adapt to annual changes in the availability of nectar, they may be well suited for adaptation if climate change alters the timing of flowering plants in the future.



JOHN FITZPATRICK SPOTS A FLORIDA SCRUB-JAY; PHOTO BY DUSTIN ANGELL

# STUDY REVEALS A KEY **LINK FOR SAVING A SPECIES**

Director John Fitzpatrick's continuation of a 45-year study of endangered Florida Scrub-Jays identified a measure for habitat size that is key to their recovery. Fitzpatrick and colleagues demonstrated that families with larger territories were able to raise nestlings with higher survival rates to fledging.



PHOTO BY DONNA McCOWN/GBBC

# **BIRDERS ARE THE BEST**

Social scientists from the Cornell Lab released research in March 2015 that showed birders are tops among outdoor recreationists for engaging in conservation activities. The survey showed birders were five times more likely than nonrecreationists to enhance land for wildlife, advocate for wildlife, and donate to conservation groups. Birding was the best possible predictor of conservation engagement, outperforming education, political ideology, and participation in other wildlife recreation activities.

# **MAPPING AN EPIDEMIC**

"From a bacteria's perspective, there isn't much difference between a human being and a House Finch," says Wesley Hochachka. That is why the National Institutes of Health has helped fund research by André Dhondt and Hochachka, both scientists in Bird Population Studies, into the spread of an eye disease in House Finches. The study started with Project FeederWatch data and has broadened to examine how genetic changes in the bacterial pathogen are affecting the severity of disease and the bacteria's ability to move from one host to the next. The findings could help predict the evolution and spread of emerging diseases in humans.

# RESEARCH ENDOWMENTS:

Sustainable funding for future generations of scientists

A SAMPLING OF ENDOWMENT FUND RESEARCH FROM 2015

# Samuel C. Johnson Fellowship in **Biodiversity and the Halberstadt Graduate Fellowship**

Investigating Birds and Climate Change in the Himalayas

Ph.D. candidate Sahas Barve spent the spring and summer in his native India studying the shifting distributions of Green-backed and Cinereous tits along an elevational gradient of 3,000 to 13,000 feet. The Himalayas are warming three times faster than other areas on Earth, which could spur Cinereous Tits to move up the mountains. On the other hand,



PHOTO BY SHAILEE SHAH

Green-backed Tits may have an advantage at better utilizing oxygen in the thin air at higher elevations. Barve's study is one of the first to examine how physiology may affect elevational movements of bird species in response to changes in climate and habitat.



# **Ivy Expeditions Fund**

Studying Superb Songsters of the Outback

Australia's Superb Lyrebird is famous for the male's ability to mimic almost any sound, from the songs of other birds to chainsaws, cameras, and car alarms. Three Cornell undergraduates—Taylor Heaton, Sarah Dzielski (at left), and James Purcell—traveled to Blue Mountains National Park this summer to work with Cornell Lab postdoctoral associate Anastasia Dalziel. The students studied how and why male lyrebirds mimic alarm calls of other species during courtship. As a bonus, the trio returned with an extensive set of lyrebird audio and video recordings to add to the Cornell Lab's Macaulay Library.

# **Athena Fund for Graduate Research**

Advancing Golden-winged Warbler Conservation

Golden-winged Warblers have suffered one of the steepest declines of any Neotropical migratory songbird. Millions of dollars have been invested in conserving their habitat in the United States, but little is known about



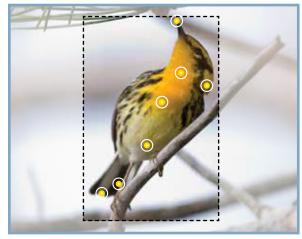
their wintering habitat where they spend six months each year. Last year Cornell graduate student Ruth Bennett (at right) launched a project in Central America to study the different habitat needs of male and female golden-wings. Bennett's work could help the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to better execute conservation projects across the full life cycle of this at-risk species.

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# **TECHNOLOGY**

"MERLIN UNLOCKED BIRDING FOR ME, IT TURNED OUT TO BE THE BRIDGE I NEEDED...BETWEEN FIELD AND FIELD GUIDE."

—Cara Byington, writer for The Nature Conservancy's Cool Green Science blog (and novice birder)



BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER BY CHRISTOPHER L. WOOD

# **COMPUTER VISION FOR BIRD ID**

The Cornell Lab's free Merlin® Bird ID smartphone app, released last year, has helped more than 625,000 people identify birds so far. This year the Merlin development team—in collaboration with researchers at Cornell Tech and Caltech—debuted a web engine that turns digital cameras into bird ID tools. Users just log on to AllAboutBirds.org/photoID, upload their own snapshots, and click on the bill, eye, and tail. Merlin looks at the pixels and uses powerful artificial intelligence techniques to suggest a list of possible IDs for the bird in the photo. "Computers can process images much more efficiently than humans. They can organize, index, and match vast constellations of visual information," says collaborator and CornellTech computer scientist Serge Belongie. After the photo ID tool graduates from beta testing, it will be added to the Merlin Bird ID app.

# EBIRD/MACAULAY LIBRARY: HISTORIC COLLABORATION

Over the past 80 years, the Macaulay Library has grown into the world's largest archive of natural sounds. Now the Macaulay Library is entering a new era with online tools that enable people everywhere to contribute media recordings as part of their eBird checklist. "We want to create a 21st-century digital natural history archive," says Macaulay Library program manager Jessie Barry. "Now anyone can use their smartphone to take a photo and record some audio of, say, a flying V of Sandhill Cranes and their rattling calls overhead. Then they can catalogue it in our archives, and in the 22nd century their great-grandchildren will be able to see and hear those same cranes via the Macaulay Library." The new tools are in beta testing and will be ready to accept multimedia submissions from the public soon.



ISTOCK.COM/SANDHILL CRANES BY FRANK LEUNG



THE NEW eBIRD MOBILE APP COMES IN MANY LANGUAGES

# A GAME-CHANGER FOR CONSERVATION

In May the American Bird Conservancy presented eBird with the Leon Levy Award for Innovation in Bird Conservation. "eBird is a game changer," said ABC president George Fenwick. eBird data have informed conservation actions to stop wind farm planning in Tennessee that posed risks to eagles, pass a law in Florida that prohibits drones in state parks (due to disturbance to breeding birds), and identify priority areas for protection in Ecuador. This year a new eBird mobile app will put eBird reporting into the hands of millions more birders worldwide, including those in India and China, where many people access the Internet primarily through mobile devices.

# **IMPACT**

"WITH THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES FACING OUR PLANET, NEVER HAVE WE NEEDED SCIENCE MORE."

—Cornell Lab Conservation Science Director Amanda Rodewald, in an op-ed published by The Hill newspaper in March 2015

# SCIGIRLS STUDY BIRDS IN THE CITY

The Cornell Lab's Public Engagement in Science Program was a consultant on the third season of PBS's *SciGirls*, a children's show aimed at energizing young girls for learning and careers in science. "*SciGirls* is fortunate to have powerful partners advising us about citizen science, including the Cornell Lab of

Ornithology, NASA, and SciStarter," said *SciGirls* executive producer Richard Hudson. In one

episode, the *SciGirls* explored the Cornell Lab's Celebrate Urban Birds program in Denver. The girls learned how their citizen-science observations play an important role in helping scientists understand birds in urban environments. Since the series' launch in 2010, SciGirls episodes have tallied more than 25 million viewer impressions.

©2015 SCIGIRLS/TWIN CITIES PUBLIC TELEVISION



GREATER SAGE-GROUSE BY GERRIT VYN

# **CONSERVATION STORYTELLING THAT OPENS EYES**

In May, 1.2 million Americans tuned in to watch "The Sagebrush Sea," a primetime TV documentary aired on the PBS program *Nature* and produced by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The film—a product of an intensive 20-month filming effort in Wyoming—documented a year in the life of the Greater Sage-Grouse and the sagebrush steppe ecosystem as a way of introducing the public to the incredible biodiversity in an area often referred to as "The Big Empty." After the TV show, the Cornell Lab partnered with Audubon and The Nature Conservancy to take the film directly to influential audiences, with special screenings in Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, and Montana, and a science museum movie tour in Denver, Boise, and Salt Lake City. In August, film producers were invited to show the film at the White House. "Until now 'sage-grouse' has always been the name of a problem," said a staff member of the Council on Environmental Quality. "Now I know they are much more than that. Thank you."

# WAKING THE GIANT IN BIRD CONSERVATION

Land trusts are a sleeping giant in bird conservation. More than 1,700 land trusts and other private groups manage a vast network of 24 million acres that's nearly as large as the entire National Park Service system in the Lower 48 states. But for many local trusts, their expertise lies in land acquisition and easements—not habitat management. According to a Cornell Lab survey, more than half of land trusts say that bird conservation factors into their land purchase decisons, yet only 11 percent of land trusts have identified bird species of conservation concern on their lands. In 2015 the Cornell Lab launched a Land Trust Initiative for strategic bird conservation on protected private lands. Pilot projects in Upstate New York empowered the Indian River Lakes Conservancy and Thousand Islands Land Trust to launch restoration work in critical habitats for Golden-winged Warblers. In future collaborations the Cornell Lab will offer a suite of planning resources, technical advice, and capacitybuilding support tools that cater to land trusts and the more than 100 birds species with breeding distributions primarily on private lands.



COURTESY SARA BARKER

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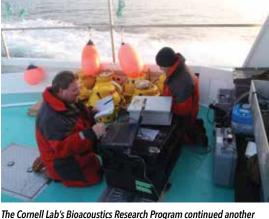
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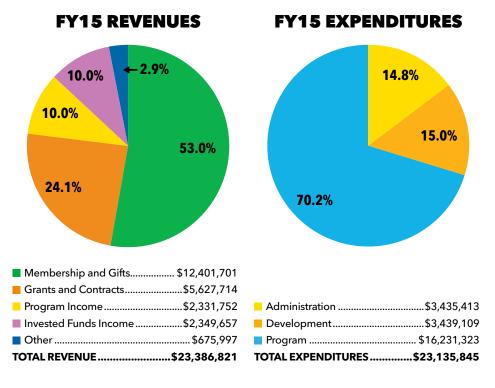
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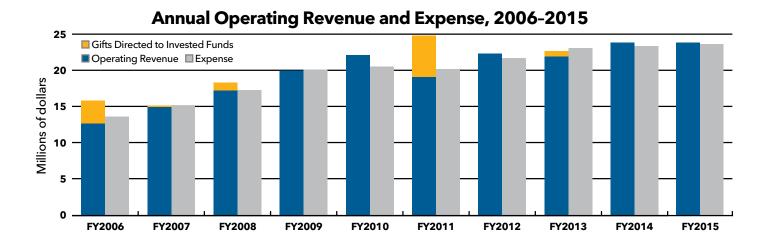
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