

Sunday November 20, 2005
Elmira/Corning, NY

For the birds

A Burdett couple's life and love is documenting the travels of migrating birds

Story and Photos by Jim Pfiffer Star-Gazette November 20, 2005

A banded bird is released through a small opening in a porch window on the old farmhouse where the Gregoires study and track migrating birds at their hilltop refuge.

Who they are

John Gregoire: Ornithologist and field biologist with academic degrees in biology, management, ornithology and national security affairs; served more than 20 years as a U.S. Naval Intelligence officer.

Suzanne Gregoire: Ornithologist, field biologist, accomplished wildlife artist, former park naturalist, graphic artist and currently studying dragonflies.

Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory

Wildlife sanctuary and bird banding station.

Owned and run by wife and husband, Suzanne and John Gregoire (pronounced Greg-war).

Opened in 1986 on 60 acres of private land in Burdett.

In 20 years, the couple has caught, banded and released more than 75,000 birds of 130 species.

Not open to the public for tours or visits.

For more information or to donate supplies and money, Kestrel Haven, 5373 Fitzgerald Road, Burdett, 14818-9626, e-mail:

kestrelhavenamo@att.net or online at <http://home.att.net/~kestrelhaven/>. The Web site offers a checklist of birds seen in

Schuyler County and closeup photos of various birds.



John Gregoire measures a goldfinch's wing before crimping an identification band on the bird's right leg. The information helps scientists learn about bird migrations and changes in the environment.

This downy woodpecker will be untangled, measured and banded as one of the 5,100 birds the Gregoires have banded since July at their wildlife sanctuary in Burdett.

John Gregoire pulls birds from the mesh bags around his neck, then measures, bands and releases them through the nearby window. His wife, Suzanne, records the information with pad and pencil, to later be entered into a computer.



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During the fall bird migration, John and Suzanne Gregoire have to check their nets every hour.

They string 7-foot-high, fine-mesh nets along hedges, woodlots and meadows on their 60-acre former farm in Burdett to catch migrating birds. It's like fishing for birds, except the catch gets banded and released, unharmed.

And like fishing, you're never sure what you're going to catch.

"You round the corner and come to a net - and it could be empty or it may be holding something really exciting - like a lot of birds, rare species or something really pretty," Suzanne Gregoire says.

The Gregoires (pronounced Greg-wars) have been tending their nets and flocks for 20 years. They do it at Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory, a wildlife sanctuary and bird banding station they built, run and enjoy on the more than 170-year-old former Fitzgerald Farm.

It's named for the kestrel, a common small falcon and favorite bird of the Gregoires.

"I love what I'm doing because I get to be outside every day and peek into the lives of something wild and free," Suzanne Gregoire says.

Why they do it

The Gregoires' research helps document the species and number of birds migrating through the area, the bird's health, longevity and the biological health of the region, from habitat destruction to global warming. They also provide wildlife habitat information to local forest services and governments.

The couple has just completed their fall migration banding. Since July, the two said they caught, measured, recorded and banded 5,100 birds. They broke a personal daily record Oct. 12 when they banded 250 birds, besting their 1999 record by 73 birds.

Birds are the Gregoire's life, vocation and avocation. Husband and wife are dedicated scientists and educated nature lovers who fell in love with each other and with birds.

"I couldn't have a better partner," John Gregoire says. "We're very much in tune to what each of us has to do. It's strengthened our relationship."

It's a working relationship that begins at the nets - 42-foot-long nets that crisscross the sanctuary. Birds can't see the nets, so they fly into them and fall into pockets in the netting.

John and Suzanne Gregoire gently and deftly untangle the birds and place them in mesh bags hanging from their necks. The bags are color-coded for species and gender, and used to transport the birds back to the house for banding.

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Some of the birds, especially boisterous chickadees, put up a fuss and squawk and peck at the nimble fingers as they untangle the netting.

"If you have a cut or a sore on your finger they'll find it and peck at it," Suzanne Gregoire says."

"You also get pooped on, a lot," her husband adds.

While the Gregoires make it look easy, they explain that it took years to learn how to remove the birds without harming them.

The \$135 "mist nets" are the most expensive equipment at the sanctuary. The Gregoires use up to 24 of them every season. Storms, deer, bats and other animals can easily rip the sheer nets to shreds. That's why the Gregoires roll up the nets at night and during foul weather.

"The nets last about a year before they are no longer safe to use," John Gregoire explains.

"We don't make any money from this," he says. "We finance it out of (our own) pocket and with a few donations from folks. Stillman's Greenhouse in Montour Falls gave us some birdseed."

Creating safe haven

John Gregoire, a former Naval intelligence officer, and Suzanne Gregoire, a former park naturalist, started the banding station in 1986 when they moved to Burdett from Washington, D.C.

They turned the farm into a wildlife oasis. They said they planted over 12,000 trees, and built and restored 10 ponds, streams and wetlands. The sanctuary is protected by a wildlife land trust.

It's a natural bird migration stopover, nestled between the Finger Lakes National Forest to the north and a large hemlock swamp to the south. It's a refuge of brooks, vegetable and flower gardens, grapevines and pine and hardwood trees.

Scores of bird feeders and "no hunting" signs help make the farm a safe haven for migrating and local birds. Ducks, geese, deer and other game animals take refuge at the sanctuary during fall and winter hunting seasons.

They Gregoires did it all themselves. They have no employees or assistants.

"We're the entire staff," John Gregoire says.

The duo spend about 4,000 hours a year banding 5,000 to 8,000 birds, without pay. They're volunteers, one of the 6,100 banding stations in North America. They help keep tabs on the millions of birds that migrate north and south, twice each year, sometimes flying 4,000 miles or more each way, say bird banders.

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The nearest year-round banding station is in southwest Pennsylvania, at the Powdermill Nature Reserve, a biological field station of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, John Gregoire says.

The captured birds are taken back to the house to a wooden desk on the front porch, where they are banded. On a recent weekday, John sat at the desk with his wife and pulled sparrows, goldfinches and downy woodpeckers from the mesh bags still hanging from his neck.

He measured each bird's right wing and used pliers to crimp a band on each bird's right leg. She copied the measurements and band numbers into a tablet, to later be entered into a computer. When finished, he released the banded bird through small opening in a nearby window.

"Birds are a very beautiful and simple creatures, yet their very existence is totally dependent on what people do," John Gregoire says. "Since I started doing this, I've become more conscious of how selfish people are, especially when it comes to how they treat the environment."

That's why the Gregoires treat birds with such respect.

That's why they said they are so thrilled when they catch a bird that they previously banded - "a return."

Such was the case Nov. 11, when the Gregoires discovered a surprise in one of their nets, a one-legged chickadee they had captured and banded a year ago.

"We never thought we'd see him again because he had one leg," John Gregoire says. "But he came back. He's one of our Canadian birds that winters here."

The Gregoires had 118 returns this season. In previous years, the birds they banded on the sanctuary have been found, alive and well, from Quebec to Tampa, Fla., they said.

Reaping the rewards

The Gregoires day begins when they roll out of bed at 4:30 a.m. to check the nets. Some days they say it so cold it numbs their bare fingers when they remove the birds from the nets.

When migration peaks, the couple may spend weeks working at their home.

"Last year we worked 23 days straight, without leaving this place," John Gregoire says.

But they say the rewards are worth it, calling it a rare treat to hold a tiny and beautifully plumaged bird in your palm and enjoy the feathery warmth of a few ounces of fragile life.

Their reward is knowing they are helping protect the birds, which are easily affected by small changes in the environment. That's why birds are good indicators of the health of their surroundings, John Gregoire

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says.

This year's rewards included re-catching an 11-year-old common yellowthroat warbler the Gregoires say has made 22 trips to Central America and back.

"That's a record for us," John Gregoire says. "It's amazing to think it has survived all the hazards, habitat destruction and predators for that long. It's a rough world for these little guys. That's why we're trying to collect information to help people manage and protect them."

Compliments and concerns

That's one reason the Gregoires are respected by their friends and neighbors, like Jylle Benson-Gauss, who co-owns Good Groceries in Watkins Glen.

"People like John and Sue realize we're not alone on this planet, and what we do affects everything else," Benson-Gauss says. "They're very involved in environmental issues and they do their work for the love and joy of doing something they care deeply about."

This year the Gregoires face a new problem in their bird study - avian flu. Scientists fear the flu, currently found only in birds, may mutate and infect humans.

"I'm worried about the avian flu," Suzanne Gregoire says. "But John isn't."

The couple worry more about feral cats that kill the birds in the nets.

But they don't have much time for worries. The bird migration doesn't stop for worries. That's why the Gregoires say they will continue to band and study birds until they are physically unable to hike to the nets.

But they never plan to lose their respect and love of wildlife and nature.

"Never take birds for granted," Suzanne Gregoire says. "There are so many threats out there to their existence. Every time you see a bird, be glad you did. It's a gift from nature."