



Burroughs Audubon Society

The Greater Kansas City Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Many Hands, One Extraordinary Story

Article and photos by Heather Cwach, Johnson County K-State Extension Master Naturalist



What happens when volunteers, researchers, conservation organizations, birders, photographers, youth groups, and community partners all work toward a common goal?

You begin to unlock the secrets of one of Kansas' most remarkable migratory songbirds—the Prothonotary Warbler.

For four years, an incredible network of partners has come together to better understand and protect this brilliant golden warbler. The Johnson County K-State Extension Master Naturalists have joined forces with Burroughs Audubon Society, Sperry-Galligar Audubon Society, Pittsburg State University, the Kansas City Public Library's Schlagle Library at Wyandotte County Lake, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the National Audubon Society, citizen scientists across Missouri and eastern Kansas, birders, photographers, local scouting groups, and many other dedicated volunteers.

Each partner contributes something unique.

Birders submit observations through eBird that help identify nesting areas. Audubon chapters, scouting groups, and community partners build and donate nest boxes that provide essential breeding habitat. Extension Master Naturalists establish, maintain and monitor nest box trails, collect nesting data, and assist researchers during banding operations. Photographers document the project, helping to share its story and inspire others to appreciate these remarkable birds. Researchers transform thousands of observations into meaningful discoveries that deepen our understanding of Prothonotary Warbler ecology and migration.

Individually, each contribution may seem small.

Together, they have produced remarkable results.

This year, researchers recaptured adult Prothonotary Warblers that had been banded as nestlings just one year earlier. Those fuzzy, awkward youngsters had survived their first migration to South America and back, returning not only to Kansas, but to the very region where they hatched. Some even established nests only a short distance from the boxes where their lives began.



The project also reached another exciting milestone with the recovery of miniature geolocators from returning birds. These tiny devices are beginning to reveal what was once impossible to know; where individual birds spend the winter, the routes they follow during migration, and the incredible journeys hidden within a creature weighing little more than half an ounce.



Every new discovery is the result of collaboration.

A single eBird checklist may lead researchers to a potential new nesting site. A donated nest box may become the birthplace of a bird that returns the following year. A volunteer checking boxes on a warm summer morning may help a scientist recover a bird wearing a geolocator, mapping a migration spanning thousands of miles. A roving photographer shares a photo that captured a reclusive bird sporting colorful leg “jewelry.”

None of these discoveries belong to one person or one organization.

They belong to a community united by curiosity, conservation, and a shared commitment to understanding the natural world.

As this partnership continues to grow, so does the story of the Prothonotary Warbler. With every season, every returning bird, and every new volunteer, another chapter is written. One that reminds us that the greatest conservation successes are rarely the work of individuals, but of communities working together toward something much larger than themselves.