

Migration and Collaboration: Protecting the Wood Thrush

In June of 2025, Riveredge took part in the Range-wide Wood Thrush Motus Project, a collaboration between the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, and SELVA, a biodiversity conservation organization serving Central and South America. Avian research is putting Riveredge on the map, thanks to what is truly a success story in collaboration, both locally and internationally.

Upon learning of this hemisphere-wide study, Research Manager and Licensed Master Bird Bander Jana Gedymin recognized a chance for the Riveredge bird banding program to significantly contribute to the advancement of avian science. The expertise of the bird banding team, the habitat at Riveredge, and the timing were all perfect. However, to take part in the study, Riveredge would need to create a temporary Motus Station on-site.

Motus Stations require the installation of special equipment that can receive information transmitted by animals carrying miniature radio telemetry tags. Receiving those radio signals is how Motus, an international network of researchers, collects data to study the movement



and behavior of birds, bats, and insects. With assistance and equipment provided by Lake Michigan Bird Observatory, a temporary Motus station was installed on the west end of the Riveredge trail system.



Jana is also trained and licensed to fit birds with Motus tags, which are more like tiny backpacks than a traditional bird band. With the help of partnering midwestern Motus collaborators, permit updates, and specialized training, Riveredge was ready to start tagging! ➔

The wood thrush is a forest-nesting songbird with a long-distance migration. Wood thrushes spend the breeding season in the central and eastern United States and then migrate to wintering grounds in Central America. It has become an at-risk species, having experienced a 50% population loss since 1970. Every individual wood thrush has an important story to tell, in terms of where these birds breed, stopover, and winter.

Because the species travels so far, meeting their conservation goals takes commitment not just of one region, but a network that spans multiple continents. Where, this study asks, are these animals experiencing the greatest impact? What kinds of terrain provide the best support for their migratory journeys? Where might they need greater protection to thrive? Each bird represents a precious piece of the puzzle. Motus tags weigh just over a single gram each, a light weight to shoulder that provides powerful information to help safeguard the future of the wood thrush.



In June of 2025, Jana Gedymin and experienced bird banding volunteer Sue Kaehler successfully tagged five individual wood thrushes at Riveredge, identified by the numbers on their Motus tags: 64878, 64879, 64880, 64881, and 64882. During tagging, information is collected from each bird, including their age, sex, and measurements. Their Motus tag backpacks are gently fitted, and away they fly.



Local movements of tagged wood thrushes on breeding grounds at Riveredge were monitored using a handheld telemetry device, providing insight into habitat use and associated behaviors.

The wood thrushes tagged in June remained at Riveredge until late September or early October. Then, they set out on their epic journey, transmitting to dozens of Motus stations along the way, each time pinging their location and tracking their progress. By late October, we had data about their arrivals. 📍



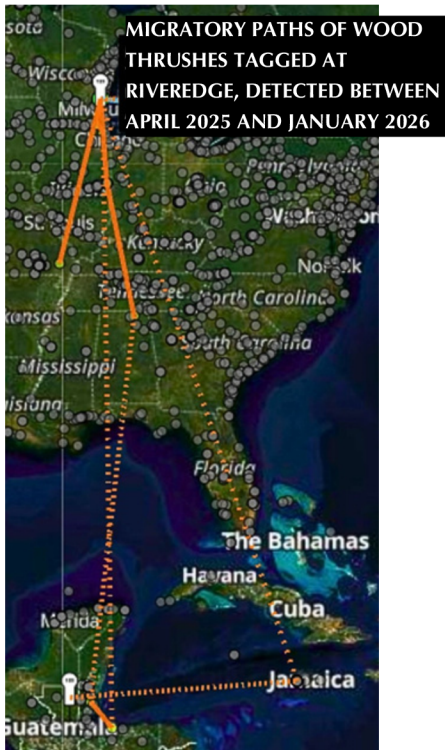
64880



64881



64878



Thrushes 64880 and 64881 were tagged in Riveredge’s Mayhew Woods on the same day: June 19, 2025. In late October, they both pinged the Motus station at the Jardín Botánico Lancetilla. These two birds arrived in Honduras at the same destination within a week of each other. 64878, a wood thrush tagged in the State Natural Area within the Riveredge campus, also provided migration data, arriving in Belize in time to ping the Motus Station at The Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education on October 27, 2025.

The other two wood thrushes present more of a mystery, with 64882’s trail going cold in Missouri and 64879 not currently presenting data. This could be due to a variety of factors, like tag malfunction or the bird simply not traveling within reach of a Motus station. Motus tags have a two year life span, so more data about all five wood thrushes could still be forthcoming. Riveredge hopes to track their return journey in spring of 2026.

These Riveredge wood thrushes are helping contribute to a much larger picture of conservation, which is only possible because of the collaborative passion of researchers in many different time zones and latitudes.

In Wisconsin, Riveredge is one of three organizations involved, in addition to Carpenter Nature Center and Beaver Creek Preserve. However, the power behind this project goes far beyond our own state.



Pictured above is a screen capture of all the wood thrush paths visible on the Motus website. The data from all Motus stations is processed by Birds Canada, and made freely available to researchers and the public throughout the world. It’s a stunning example of how ambitious collaboration can change the fate of a species, and how nature connects us—across cultures and countries—in fundamental ways. It’s a hopeful reminder that many people care deeply on a global level about keeping our planet a place where diverse species of birds can continue to survive.

The June 2025 wood thrush Motus tagging at Riveredge was supported by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, the generosity of individual donors, and the partnership of the Lake Michigan Bird Observatory.

Riveredge is seeking funding to support ongoing avian research, with the goal of establishing a permanent Motus station on campus. Please contact Director of Development Sharon Cross to get involved at scross@riveredge.us or 262-416-1361.

Special thanks to Kim Pemble for photo of nesting wood thrush in Riveredge’s State Natural Area (pg.1)