

Continued from **Previous Page**

she recently recalled. All she knew were buildings, while her committee knew all there was to know about all things wild.

“Just so happened,” said Harrison, “they started talking about all these birds colliding into buildings. I was like, ‘Wait, hold the phone. Who have you told about this? Give me addresses.’” She speed-dialed all the right people, asked each one to ditch the lights. Building after building, they did. “Now,” says Harrison, “it’s part of our normal world. Like clockwork. Every single tall building. It’s like a Chicago thing.”

It’s called “Lights Out Chicago” and more than any other American city, lights go dark after 11 p.m. when the birds fly through.

But that wasn’t enough. And it wasn’t keeping birds from raining down some nights.

In 2003, an oboe player and bird lover named Robbie Hunsinger decided even more might be saved if a band of predawn rescuers walked the city, scooping up stunned birds before the street sweepers and scavengers — rats and gulls among them — did them in.

That first year, the patrol was thin. Nearly every bird was dead by the time they got to it.

Now, Prince and her compatriots — among the ranks an oboist with the Joffrey Ballet, a Kenyan ornithologist, and plenty of architects and lawyers — pound the downtown pavement well before daybreak during fall and spring migration when Chicago’s night sky is thick with birds, flapping against stiff odds.

As early as 4 a.m., depending on when the sun comes up, the rescuers patrol a two-square-mile

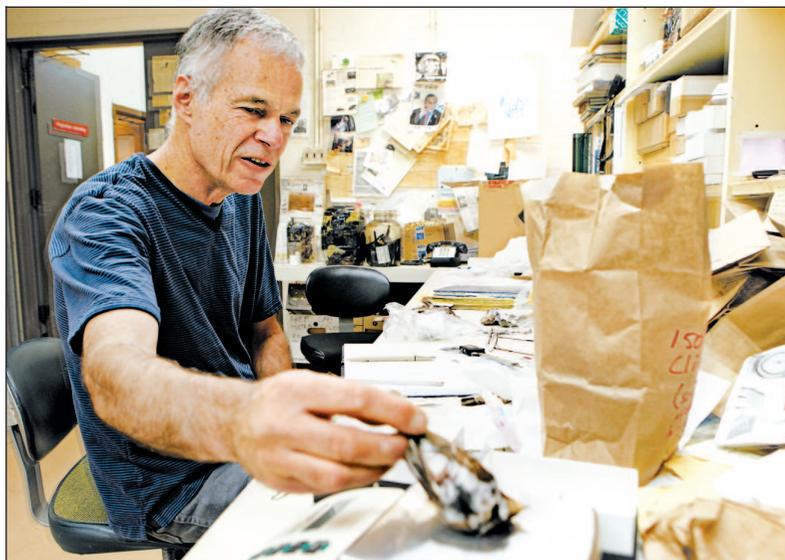
swath of the city, from Oak Street on the north to Congress Parkway on the south, and from the lake west to Halsted Street. In the murky predawn light, they comb countless nooks and crannies, poking flashlights into

revolving doors, behind trash bins, under fire escapes, in search of even one downed bird.

Some sad mornings, the crew finds as many as 291, more than half of them dead, the others dazed or injured and stymied by the city.

“Getting that bird to safety is Job One,” says Prince.

With enough volunteers to dispatch a band of 8 to 12 rescuers an hour before daylight, seven days a



Dave Willard manages the 500,000-specimen bird collection at the Field Museum. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS

week, mid-August to mid-November, and again mid-March to mid-June, some 40 percent of the birds are saved, their wounds tended to, feathers unruffled, let loose in the wilds. So far this fall, the count stands at some 1,500 downtown rescues.

The bird-saving ways are catching on. There’s a homeless fellow in the Loop who keeps the hot line number in his pocket. When he finds a downed bird, he knocks on church doors to use a phone and get a rescuer on the scene.

One recent chilly morning, a white-haired Loop lawyer in a Brooks Brothers trench coat dashed down an alley just off Wacker Drive, cradling a Starbucks in one hand and a dead ruby-crowned kinglet in the other.

He handed the bird to Prince, who was back on her knees, this time behind a parking garage, tending to a head-banged ruby-crowned kinglet.

Hovering over the rescue in progress, brown bag at the ready, was Yvonne Randle, a security guard at the garage, who had called Prince to the crash site.

“The bird people are the most reliable people we know,” said Randle. “You call

them, they come. Like clockwork, they’re here. Seven days a week. Rain or sleet or snow.”

Once Prince eased the bird into the bag, she thanked Randle for the call and scurried on.

Another ring from the red phone, another bird for the morning’s log.

“Of course birds die in migration,” said Prince, this time tucking a lifeless hermit thrush into a plastic bag, where it would then be



tagged and stored in one of the Field Museum’s four overstuffed bird freezers, eventually inscribed in the story of migration.

The inevitability that some birds won’t survive is not what pulls Prince from her bed in the dark of night. It’s that the city’s glass and lights and impenetrable towers are indiscriminate killers.

“These birds could be the strongest ones. This might be the best hermit thrush of the species. It could have been the best breeder, raised the most young or been the best survivor of its long migrations,” said Prince. “No species can afford to lose its very best.

“When we rescue any bird, we know we might be saving a best member. Each one deserves a second chance, a chance to make it.” With that, she slapped shut the back of her old red van. She had a full load of 35 rescues tucked in there.

The wilds were calling.

And there’s more than one way through the city.

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Bird-crash list for Chicago

Chicago, the city that thrusts bright lights and shimmering towers into the sky, is smack-dab in migration’s way. Here’s the list of top 10 bird species killed in downtown Chicago, tallied since 2003 when the Chicago Bird Collision Monitors began their predawn patrol to gather the dead, and rescue the dazed or injured. (The Field Museum’s Dave Willard, who calls himself “the mortician,” says the birds die from head trauma in most cases.)

1. White-throated sparrow

Migration pattern: Northern Canada to southern U.S.

Weight: About 1 ounce

Distinctive markings:

Black eye stripe, white crown, yellow splotch by the eyes, white throat bordered by a black whisker.



2. Ovenbird

Migration: Northern Canada to southern tip of Central America

Weight: Just under 1 ounce

Distinctive markings:

Olive brown back, orange crown bordered by black stripes.



3. Brown creeper

Migration: As far north as Alaska to southern U.S. and Central America

Weight: 3/10 of an ounce

Distinctive markings:

Well-camouflaged, upper parts streaked brown and white, white belly. Creeps along trees, in search of insects.

4. Yellow-bellied sapsucker

Migration: Northern Canada to far southern Central America

Weight: About 1 3/4 ounces

Distinctive markings: Messy black and white “barring” on back; throat and crown completely red on males. Woodpecker.

5. Hermit thrush

Migration: Alaska, northern Canada to mid-Central America

Weight: About 1 1/4 ounces

Distinctive markings: Brown back, reddish tail; black spots on chest.



6. Dark-eyed junco

Migration: Western Canada, flooding into North America, to Central America

Weight: Just under 1 ounce

Distinctive markings: Flashy little sparrow, crisp markings, black eye, white belly and tail feathers.



7. American woodcock

Migration: Southeastern Canada to southern, eastern U.S.

Weight: About 7 ounces

Distinctive markings: Superbly camouflaged, brown and black markings; plump; long bill.

9. Swamp sparrow

Migration: Northern Canada to mid-Central America

Weight: 6/10 of an ounce

Distinctive markings:

Unstriped gray chest, reddish-brown on wings, whitish throat, grayish belly.

10. Tennessee warbler

Migration: Northern Canada to southern Mexico and northern tip of South America

Weight: 4/10 of an ounce

Distinctive markings: Drably colored with few distinct markings; green back, whitish belly.

— Barbara Mahany