

IOS awards five grants for important research projects

By Robert Fisher

One of IOS's primary objectives is "to promote scientific research and education in order to improve knowledge and awareness of birds in Illinois."

This year, 2008, IOS, with the support of the DuPage Birding Club and a group of private donors, has awarded five research grants, each at \$500.

Mark Alessi of the University of Illinois in Champaign, in cooperation with the Illinois Natural History Survey, is studying the reproductive strategies of **Yellow-breasted Chats** (*Icteria veeerns*), including how they behave after a nest loss, what cues they may use in deciding where to re-nest, and how much habitat they need during the breeding season. This research includes fitting up to 15 male and female chats with a harness-style radio transmitter (weighing less than 1.2 grams). The study location is Kennekuk County Park, in Vermilion County near Danville.

To follow the tagged birds during the season, two 20-meter towers containing the automatic recording units (ARUs) are being built to allow line of sight



Mark Alessi, shown holding a Yellow-breasted Chat (with antenna extending beyond the tail), is studying habit requirements of this species.

tracking of the tagged chats.

Little is known about the breeding strategies of chats: This research will be used to provide information to land managers

on how to better accommodate this declining species. Because shrublands are historically ephemeral, chats may not see habitat isolation in the same perspective as, for example, woodland birds. Crossing inhospitable habitat (roads, streams, woodlands) may not be as costly for birds using shrubland habitat.

Dr. Richard Essner and Dr. Peter Minchin of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville are developing a multivariate habitat model for the **Cerulean Warbler** (*Dendroica cerulea*), along with other neotropical migrant songbirds in Southwestern Illinois.

Forested bluffs in southwestern Illinois attract large numbers of migrating songbirds due to their location near the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois Rivers. Agricultural use (and more recent urbanization) dramatically fragmented and reduced these once extensive forests, but they still support a diverse avifauna, including the Cerulean Warbler, which will be placed on the state-threatened list this year, and which in the late 1800s was the most abundant warbler in Illinois. Ceruleans are the most rapidly declining warbler species



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in the United States. Despite this decline, Illinois holds four sites ranked in the top 20 for cerulean abundance in the United States.

The study will census bluff forest avifauna to generate baseline data for use in future sampling programs aimed at monitoring long term population trends. It will generate a predictive model, which uses vegetation data to identify suitable habitat for Ceruleans and other target species. This model will inform future land-use decisions and assist conservation efforts in southwestern Illinois. IOS grant funds will purchase a rangefinder for fixed-distance point count surveys.