2025 Banding Season Report

Allegheny Front Migration Observatory (AFMO)
Prepared by: Field Leadership Team

Overview

The 2025 season at the Allegheny Front Migration Observatory was marked by steady operations, dedicated volunteerism, and a notable shift in both participation and environmental conditions. While species counts and banding data will be detailed in the accompanying scientific summary, this report highlights five major themes: the inspiring rise of youth engagement, the challenges posed by shifting weather patterns, species highlights, community outreach, and future research initiatives.

High Point: Youth Engagement and Legacy Building

One of the most inspiring highlights of the season was the enthusiastic participation of young adults eager to contribute to banding and field operations. Many were undergraduate and graduate students in biology, wildlife science, and environmental studies—some already graduates or post-grads—drawn to AFMO by its reputation for mentorship, scientific rigor, and hands-on experience. Several are now actively pursuing federal banding permits, guided by seasoned mentors and buoyed by the support of the AFMO community.

Their presence infused the station with fresh energy: early mornings filled with curiosity, careful bird handling, and thoughtful questions about migration, molt, habitat, and data integrity. These emerging scientists not only strengthened daily operations but also demonstrated a deep respect for the traditions and responsibilities of fieldwork.

This season, 41 volunteers completed and signed the Forest Service Competence Affirmation Form, affirming their understanding of safety protocols, ethical handling, and operational standards. This marks a significant rise in formal engagement and reflects the growing professionalism and commitment within our volunteer base.

Volunteers with banding permits or sub-permits who banded birds this fall included:
Cheyenne Carter, Robert Dean, Dawn Fox, LeJay Graffious, Orion Metheny, Joseph Niederhauser, and Lauren Strong.

Volunteer net tenders were:
Alexander Travia, John Anderson, Richard Bailey, Mike Bergen, Ruth Bergen, Jean Bridwell, Jackie Burns, Patricia Bushey, Scott Carr, Natalie Donofrio, Gwyneth Dun, Jessica Findley, Kelley Flaherty, Katherine Garst, Clarissa Gideos, Darrell Good, Emma Heatherton, William Hirsch, Krista Hill, Elise Jones, John Jacobs, Jereny Jacko, Bill Kee, Dawn Lehman, Meredeth Lewis, Brady Moore-Woedl, Jose Martins, Elizabeth Mahooney, Anna Martin, Bree McCullough, Jason

McCullough, Maggie Perl, Elizabeth Schell, Katie Schroeder, Lacey Slekar, Hayley Sutton, Adrianne Thackeny, Gabriel Urso, Jose Vidal, and Emma Weatherston.

A special shout-out to **Kevin Dodge and the Garrett College Wildlife Club** for their generous help hauling the station up and down the mountain between the parking lot and the Allegheny Front. Their strength and spirit helped carry the work—literally and figuratively—forward

Low Point: Sparse Migration and Weather Challenges

The most sobering aspect of the season was the noticeable lack of birds. While the verdict is still out, station consensus suggests that changing weather patterns played a significant role. Persistent east winds dominated much of the season, disrupting the usual migratory flow. AFMO's success is historically tied to brisk west winds that funnel birds along the Allegheny Front, without which our nets remained quieter than usual.

In response to these concerns, and with the generous assistance of David Carroll from Virginia Tech, AFMO installed a modern weather station on site. This new equipment allowed us to accurately record weather conditions throughout the season, adding a critical layer of data to our long-term monitoring efforts. Having real-time, site-specific weather data will strengthen our ability to correlate migration patterns with atmospheric conditions and better understand the shifts we're witnessing.

Species Highlights

Despite the reduced numbers, AFMO has banded a total of 1,343 birds representing 51 species. The most frequently banded species included:

- **Black-throated Blue Warblers**
- **Black-throated Green Warblers**
- **Cape May Warblers**
- **Blackpoll Warblers**

These species, emblematic of fall migration through the Appalachians, offered valuable data points and moments of wonder for both seasoned banders and first-time visitors.

Visitors and Community Engagement

Visitors were abundant and frequent throughout the season, reinforcing AFMO's role as both a scientific station and a community touchstone. Particularly heartening was the involvement of young students under the age of 10. Many demonstrated impressive bird identification skills or an eager willingness to learn, often surprising seasoned banders with their enthusiasm and

sharp eyes. Their presence reminded us that stewardship begins early—and that the magic of migration can spark lifelong curiosity.

We also observed that social media outreach played a meaningful role in drawing interest and engagement. Posts shared on the Brooks Bird Club Facebook page were especially helpful in spreading awareness and celebrating daily highlights. Based on conversations with many of our 20-something volunteers, we recommend expanding outreach to Instagram, which may better reach and engage younger audiences through visual storytelling and short-form updates.

Looking Ahead: Motus Tower and eTag Research

AFMO is preparing to take the next step in avian research. We are pleased to report a commitment from the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources to install a temporary Motus tower on site next year. This will allow us to begin tracking tagged birds via automated radio telemetry, adding a powerful dimension to our migration monitoring.

In anticipation of this advancement, we are exploring the integration of e-tags into our banding operations. This would allow AFMO to contribute to broader movement ecology studies and collaborate more deeply with regional and continental research networks. The addition of Motus and eTag technology marks a new chapter for AFMO—one that blends tradition with innovation and positions the station for expanded scientific impact.

Closing Reflection

2025 reminded us that the strength of AFMO lies not only in its data but in its people. The commitment of young volunteers, their pursuit of permits, and their reverence for the work affirm that the legacy of the Allegheny Front is in good hands. And with new tools to monitor our changing skies, expanded outreach to engage future stewards, and bold steps into telemetry research, we remain vigilant, adaptive, and deeply rooted in the mission of migration science and mentorship.

Submitted October 9, 2025 by Station Managers

LeJay Graffious

Bob Dean