THE UNION-RECORDER

GCSU ornithology students focus on conservation, leading nest box project for threatened Georgia warblers

Published 7:00 am Sunday, May 10, 2026

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GCSU undergraduate ornithology students, lead by their professor Dr. Michelle Moyer, installed nest boxes at Andalusia Farm earlier this semester.

Georgia College & State University ornithology students recently visited Andalusia Farm monitoring the nesting success of prothonotary warblers — using nest boxes that the students built and installed themselves. The session will be part of their ongoing project to track the birds' migration habits, funded by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

The prothonotary warbler is a species of high conservation concern in Georgia, and their migration has never been studied in the state. The students' nest boxes provide homes for the warblers and enable the students to tag them with devices that monitor barometric pressure and light, allowing researchers to identify when and where the birds stop along their migratory path.

"A bird from Georgia might not take the same route as a bird from South Carolina, and they may have a different stopover habitat that we need to protect," said Dr. Michelle Moyer, assistant professor of biological and environmental sciences.

Moyer, who is overseeing the project, says that prothonotary warblers are strong indicators of wetland health. Their population has been shrinking for decades as more than half of the wetlands in the country have been destroyed, and protecting their habitats will maintain vital levels of biodiversity across Georgia's wetlands. The nest box project will help identify where Georgia's breeding prothonotaries migrate during the winter and the types of habitats they need during the summer.

Students have installed 10 nest boxes at Andalusia and two more at the Oconee River Greenway. Warblers at large are notoriously hard to study, but the prothonotary warbler is one of just two kinds of cavity-nesting warblers in North America, so the nest boxes provide an easy way to catch and study them.

"It also allows us to monitor really closely the breeding success, so we can know how many nestlings they have, how old, how big do they grow, how fast do they grow, how many of them survive," Moyer said.

The long-term project will be led by Sarah Kennedy, an incoming master's student in Georgia College's biology and environmental sciences program, who will be driving the majority of the data collection and analysis.

Moyer says the hope is that the warblers will return to these nest boxes in future years.