Free as a Bird?

MU researchers find that man-made development affects bird flight patterns and populations

Posted: September 2, 2010

COLUMBIA, Mo.—It may seem like birds have the freedom to fly wherever they like, but researchers at the University of Missouri have shown that what's on the ground has a great effect on where a bird flies. This information could be used by foresters and urban planners to improve bird habitats that would help maintain strong bird populations.

"Movement of individuals influences nearly every aspect of biology, from the existence of a single population to interactions within and among species," said Dylan Kesler, assistant professor in fisheries and wildlife at the University of Missouri's School of Natural Resources. "Movement determines where individual birds procreate. How they spread across the landscape affects who meets whom, which in turn dictates how genes are spread."

Kesler has found that non-migrating resident birds tend to travel over forest "corridors," which are areas protected by trees and used by wildlife to travel. Birds choose to travel over forests because they can make an easier escape from predators as well as find food. Man-made features such as roads, as well as gaps forests from agriculture or rivers, can restrict birds to certain areas. When forests are removed, bird populations become isolated and disconnected, which can lead to inbreeding and weaker, more disease-prone birds.

Earlier this summer, Kesler and MU graduate student Allison Cox tagged 33 juvenile red-bellied woodpeckers in Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest. Kesler chose to study the red-bellied woodpecker because the bird lives in the same area year-round and is very loyal to specific sites. The tags used by the researchers enable their team to track the birds' daily flights using radiotelemetry and GPS technology. The tags are designed to fall off the birds after four months. The summer and fall months are important because this is when young birds are most active, establishing territories and finding mates, studies say.

The research team also hopes to discover more about natal dispersal, the time interval between when a bird moves from where it is hatched to an area where it will breed. Very little is known about what influences natal dispersal.

"In many territorial resident birds, natal dispersal is the only time an individual bird makes a substantial movement from one location to another," Kesler said. "Natal dispersal is, therefore,
integral to gene flow among populations, colonizing vacant habitat, inbreeding avoidance and maintaining optimal population densities."

This year's work builds upon research Kesler has been conducting since 2005 on three species of woodpeckers and two Pacific island kingfishers. The study is funded by a University of Missouri program to encourage new faculty. Results will be published this fall in conservation-oriented science journals. Results from Kesler's previous research about dispersal appeared in the nation's top ornithological journal, The Auk, and another paper will soon be published in Behavioral Ecology.
MU researchers tracking woodpecker movements

Associated Press | Posted: Thursday, September 2, 2010 8:44 pm

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia say their work on tracking woodpecker movements could be used to improve bird habitats.

The university said in a news release the researchers tagged 33 juvenile red-bellied woodpeckers earlier this summer in Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest.

The tags allow researchers to track the birds using radiotelemetry and GPS technology.

The team hopes to discover more about what happens when birds move from where they hatched to where they will breed.

One researcher says that in many non-migrating birds, this is the only time the birds make a substantial movement from one location to another. Previous research has shown that manmade features such as roads can restrict bird movement, creating the risk of inbreeding.
MU professor shares prescription for happiness

‘Discovery’ talk offers insight into pursuit.

By Janese Silvey
Thursday, September 2, 2010

We’ve all said it: “If I only had (fill in the blank), I’d be happy.”

Turns out, that’s not the case. Buying a home or marrying your soul mate might give you a burst of happiness, but eventually you’ll get used to the house or being a spouse and your happiness level will drop back to its genetically programmed baseline, studies have shown.

So how do we become happier and stay there? Kennon Sheldon, a psychological sciences professor at the University of Missouri, advised an audience yesterday to change their actions.

Sheldon delivered this year’s 21st Century Corps of Discovery Lecture, an annual address aimed to reinforce “discovery” at MU and spotlight an outstanding faculty member, said Michael O’Brien, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The lecture at Jesse Auditorium attracted a full house.

America is unique in that it gives citizens a constitutional right to pursue happiness, Sheldon said.

Happiness is measured by self-reported surveys, which Sheldon acknowledged aren’t foolproof but have proved to be a fairly accurate gauge over time. Using a series of questions asking students whether they regularly feel emotions such as excitement or irritability, Sheldon found that more than half of the 388 MU undergraduates he surveyed scored higher than the norm. Audience members yesterday took an abbreviated version of that survey, and most responded that they, too, are fairly high on the happiness scale.

“Most people are pretty happy. So who wants to be even happier?” he asked as most hands went up. “I thought so.”

With genetics accounting for 50 percent of a person’s happiness, circumstantial changes won’t get you there, Sheldon said. Research shows changes in one’s demographics, such as income or
marital status, accounts for a small slice of happiness. Acquiring something causes a person’s happiness to exceed his genetic baseline, but only until the change becomes the norm.

“No matter how good things get, we get used to it, take it for granted, stop noticing,” he said.

Accounting for the rest of a person’s happiness is activity — good news because it gives an individual control, Sheldon said.

He said volunteering, building relationships with others and enjoying work are all prescriptions for happiness. Balancing your time between work, family, friends, health and hobbies also makes for a cheerier life, he said, as well as being your genuine self in any social situation.

“No change what you do,” Sheldon advised, “not what you have.”

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Women marry earlier in towns with more men

By Dan Vergano

Viva Las Vegas - evolution explains why Sin City may be the place for women to get hitched after all, suggests a new study.

"When women are scarce in a population relative to men, they have greater bargaining power in romantic relationships and thus may be able to secure male commitment at earlier ages," begins the report in the *Evolutionary Psychology* journal. In other words, women may snag richer husbands at an earlier age than otherwise in such a setting, suggests the study led by psychologist Benjamin Winegard of the University of Missouri in Columbia.

The study looked at male-female ratios in 50 U.S. cities from the the 2000 U.S. Census and compared them to marriage rates and marriage ages for men and women from 18-64, coming up with an "operational sex ratio" (OSR) for each city (where an OSR of 100 means the sexes are evenly balanced and an OSR of 110 means there are 11 men for 10 women.) Las Vegas was the most man-heavy town with an OSR of 116, while Memphis and Birmingham, Ala., had the lowest OSR's of 88.

"In male biased environments, women may encounter many more male suitors and may also secure a male willing to commit to marriage at an earlier age than women in sex-balanced or female biased environments. The increased power of female choice may increase the average marital age of men, as the men may need to acquire higher social status and a greater extent of resources," predicted the authors.

Indeed, women's marriage ages were typically younger (around 24 years old) in towns with a higher OSR, as opposed to ones with a low OSR (topping out at an average of 28 years old). But men's ages were not affected to a statistically-significant extent, says the study, which saw a weak trend toward younger average ages for marriage among men in high OSR towns. "The trend suggests that the more men committing to marriages at earlier ages outweighs the longer durations of social status and resource accrual by men facing greater intrasexual competition and female selectivity," say the authors.

Pretty cold-hearted folks, these evolutionary psychologists. Maybe the men just want Elvis officiating at the wedding.
High mold levels cause problems at McReynolds Hall

Campus Facilities and MU Health and Safety are working to solve the situation.

By Tony Puricelli
Published Sept. 3, 2010

MU Environmental Health and Safety visited McReynolds Hall this week after faculty members began experiencing health troubles due to spending time in their offices.

EHS determined these problems were caused by large amounts of mold and standing water discovered around the east half of McReynolds Hall. English professor Devoney Looser said she discovered a wet carpet and evidence of mice in her basement-level office upon her return for the academic year. She said these were mild annoyances compared to the mold.

"I don't think anybody was expecting a palace when we moved here but it was worse than we anticipated," Looser said.

Looser said she had no history of allergies when she began experiencing lung inflammation and shortness of breath after returning to her office. Looser said she has heard from several other faculty members experiencing similar problems. Many professors have begun sharing offices with colleagues to escape the mold, including Looser, who has moved in with professor Ellie Ragland on the third floor.

The English Department Chairwoman Patricia Okker suggested faculty may limit the amount of time spent in their offices, according to English professor Martha Townsend, who also has a basement office. Townsend has not had direct contact with mold but has found all kinds of "creepy crawly things" throughout her office.

"I never knew whether a spider might crawl out from a drawer or a stack of papers," Townsend said. "It was distracting and discomforting."

Townsend said she has stood on top of her desk to kill the various bugs in her office. She has since reported the problem and received assistance from pest control. Similarly, Looser said she has found mouse droppings and torn up food wrappers in her desk drawers, suggesting that mice were making prominent use of her office.
"If there is any fault here, it is that lower-level people did not listen and act earlier to solve the problem," Townsend said. "People in general should take more responsibility and initiative when problems arise."

EHS is working with Campus Facilities to solve the problem. Campus Facilities spokeswoman Karlan Seville said the source of the leak has been located and repair work is scheduled for this week. Also, dehumidifiers have been placed around the East end of the building to reduce humidity.

Campus Facilities will continue cleaning offices and carrying out mold abatement until the hall is clean again. MU has contacted an outside contractor to clean all surfaces and personal items affected.

"We don't know how long the response will take but we will keep at it until the cleanup is complete," EHS Director Peter Ashbrook said.

In the meantime, faculty members have been directed to be careful with library books. Ellis Library is assisting in cleaning the books before they are re-shelved to prevent the spread of mold in the library. Instructors are also adjusting their schedules to cope with the situation.

"I've had to keep in contact with students about my current location and have even been meeting with some in the Bookmark Café," Looser said.

There have been few serious repercussions resulting from the influx of mold.

"For most people, the only health problems, if any, will be allergy-like symptoms," Ashbrook said.

Townsend said Tate Hall has been on the list for renovation since she started working at MU 20 years ago and putting up with spiders for a couple of years is not a problem.

"Right now, MU is facing many bigger problems," Looser said. "Compared to budget cuts of up to 25 percent, mold and mouse droppings are pretty insignificant. They are annoying, but not a big setback."
Mitchell isn't yet eligible

Anderson: Top recruit could join MU 'later.'

By Steve Walentik

Published September 1, 2010 at 4:45 p.m.
Updated September 2, 2010 at 1:39 p.m.

Tony Mitchell, the most heralded Missouri basketball recruit in this year's class, won't suit up for the Tigers when they open practice next month.

Mitchell

Mitchell, whom Rivals.com ranked as the nation's 12th-best player in the 2010 recruiting class, has yet to be cleared by the NCAA and is not enrolled at MU.

"Tony's case with the NCAA Eligibility Center remains under review, as has been the case for quite some time," Coach Mike Anderson said in a statement released yesterday. "However, with our fall enrollment deadline having passed, he will be unable to join our program at this time. We remain hopeful Tony will be able to join us at a point later in the season."

Earlier in the day, Rivals.com basketball recruiting analyst Jerry Meyer posted a message on his Twitter account saying Mitchell had been ruled ineligible. He cited Mitchell's former AAU coach as the source of that information. Anderson's statement refutes Meyer's reporting in that no final determination has actually been made.

The likelihood of Mitchell joining the program in the second semester remains uncertain.
Questions about Mitchell’s availability for the upcoming season intensified this summer after a Dallas television station reported that the Pinkston High School standout was the focus of a Dallas Independent School District investigation. At issue was whether Mitchell should have been allowed to play after transferring from Center of Life Academy in Miami.

That school is accredited by a home-schooling organization not recognized by DISD, so the credits he earned there were not honored when he transferred. He was allowed to regain those credits through a series of makeup exams, but DISD did not let Mitchell graduate with his class in June while examining the validity of those tests.

Mitchell has since received his diploma, but it is unknown whether his grade-point average, combined with his standardized test scores, is high enough to meet the NCAA’s minimum eligibility standards.

Mitchell averaged 20 points and 13 rebounds last year for Pinkston.

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Editorial: Why the double standard, MU?

Published Sept. 3, 2010

By now, it’s probably safe to assume everybody and their mother knows what’s going on with Derrick Washington: He has been charged with felony sexual assault, permanently suspended from the football team, his arraignment is in late September, and he is keeping his scholarship to finish his last year at MU.

OK, so he played football well and gave the Tigers some grand ol’ glory, but seriously, MU? You’re still paying him to go here?

We’re not going to get into how egregiously wrong sexual assault is, and we are not presuming his guilt. And he shouldn’t lose his scholarship over an unrelated crime either. But he should lose his athletic scholarship because, as a result of his own mistakes, he isn’t an MU athlete anymore. Permanent suspension, expulsion, getting fired — whatever you want to call it, he isn’t coming back to the team.

Sam Mellinger wrote an insightful column in the Kansas City Star this week, citing Washington as the heir to what should have been former Tiger basketball player Ricky Clemons’ punishment. In Clemons’ case (in which the guilt was caught on tape), the university failed to react and an entire UM system administration was effectively ruined with him. Washington hasn’t had his trial or made a public statement yet, but has been more or less found guilty by his school and his team, who might just be trying to cover their asses.

Although Mellinger argues the tribulations of the Clemons fiasco and justice, he concedes that if found guilty, Washington has deservedly lost a hell of a lot more than a spot on the football team.

However, it seems more than likely that Pinkel and Washington have had a chat or two about this situation. Why else would they “permanently suspend” him from the team before he has made a public statement? The media hellfire that plagued the administration of the Clemson era existed because he was brazenly guilty and no one did anything. Considering they’re already making permanent decisions, it feels safe to assume someone (Pinkel) knows something (like the truth) about his guilt.

Plenty of students come to MU on academic scholarships, and no matter how close you are to making the necessary GPA, if you don’t make it, your scholarship is taken away. Point being, if you’re not doing what you’re paid to be doing, then you shouldn’t be getting paid.

So what’s with the double standard?
DEAR READER: Now hiring: newspapers

By Tom Warhover
September 3, 2010 | 12:01 a.m. CDT

Dear Reader,

Nate Birt is the news and online editor of the Boonville Daily News. Katie Fretland works for the Chicago News Cooperative. Matt Harris is a reporter in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

You saw their bylines in the Missourian not so long ago.

Derek Kravitz and Allison Ross report from Post to Post. He’s covering Dulles and Reagan National airports, among other things, for The Washington Post, while she is writing about business at the Palm Beach newspaper.

In ’07, they were covering crime and faith beats right here in Columbia.

I found out about dozens more former Missourian-ites from a list compiled by Missouri School of Journalism Associate Dean Brian Brooks.

The headline: An overwhelming number of journalism graduates are working in journalism.

Of the 62 ’08 graduates who emphasized in newspaper journalism:

• Five people couldn’t be tracked down.

• Six were still students, in law or other advanced studies.

• One was a Vista volunteer.

• Eight worked in other fields: high school teacher, publicity coordinator, law clerk.
That leaves 42 graduates making their livings as reporters and copy editors, as designers and Web producers.

(The picture is similarly bright for graduates in strategic communications, photojournalism, magazine and broadcast areas.)

I know – that’s the way it’s supposed to work, right?

But ask Brooks one of the most common questions he gets from prospective students and their parents, and you’ll hear a different story.

When the topic of the newspaper comes up, the response goes something like this: "But I thought newspapers are dying. Why would I want my daughter/son to be in a career that is?"

Tell people you work for a newspaper, and it’s like they’re suddenly at a wake: Condolences offered in soft tones. I haven’t been hugged yet, or patted on the back, but I wouldn’t be surprised.

Newspapers, narrowly defined as a print product thrown on your doorstep, have been struggling. There’s no doubt.

But newspapers, defined more broadly as a source for information and conversation, will be around for a long, long time in many formats (including print).

Lindsay Wilkes-Edrington is on the '07-08 graduates list. She left MU for a job at Patch.com, which this month announced the start-up of its 100th online community newspaper.

Editors at Patch cover council meetings and elections, write features, make Twitter posts about interesting news of the day, hire freelancers and edit their work, take in reader-submitted photos and articles – all the things I did at a small weekly newspaper a few decades ago.

There are plans for 500 more Patch-owned community newspapers by year’s end. In February 2009 there were three.

Does that sound like a dying industry to you?
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Principal study triggered by assistant professor Jason Grissom's youth experiences

By Michelle Markelz
September 2, 2010 | 10:06 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Growing up, Jason Grissom's principals were never his pals, let alone trusted authority figures.

“One principal made a rule that wouldn't allow students to carry backpacks,” Grissom said.

The rule was an effort to restrict weapons but was not well received by students.

“We had to carry all of our textbooks to every class in our arms,” Grissom said.

When the next principal came through, the rule was changed. But, as Grissom explained, the changing of the guard as well as the rules only made each principal’s decisions seem arbitrary.

“It was like, if you felt that way about backpacks, it was hard not to feel that way about important things, like curriculum,” he said.

Grissom experienced what many students in urban, high-minority, low-income schools experience every year.

“Coming through your classic failing school district, the system turned over principals so quickly,” he said. “People never stuck around long enough to make a difference.”

Grissom, an assistant professor in the Truman School of Public Affairs since 2007, is making headway in the rather uncharted waters of defining a good principal. He said personal experience inspired his studies.
He is now working on a $1 million government-funded study to observe principals over three years.

Through his earlier research, Grissom has already uncovered qualities that make principals more effective.

In the area of professional development, he discovered that administrators who chose formal mentoring, coaching and networking received better teacher ratings. Further research also suggested higher teacher ratings tend to increase teacher retention.

Grissom said he was surprised to find that principals who used university coursework for their development showed poor performance, poor teacher ratings, and poor school performance. This, in turn, resulted in teacher dissatisfaction and poor retention.

Mentoring and coaching are thought to be more effective because of their hands-on approach, he said. They allow principals to work and learn while under the guidance of more experienced administrators.

“It may be that universities are a perfectly good venue (for further principal education),” he said. “But it suggests that what we are currently teaching isn’t the correct skill.”

The early stages of his study seem to suggest that better management skills affect teacher retention and school improvement. In a pilot program he monitored in Miami, Fla., Grissom said principals with better organizational skills had consistently higher test scores, parent approval and teacher satisfaction.

It would be ambitious to assume that after three years he will be able to pinpoint the things that make a good principal, but he hopes to identify a set of teachable skills that help principals administrate more effectively.

“Our study is exploratory,” Grissom said. “Our goal is to figure out what factors separate the most effective principals from less effective ones so that we can go in and dig into those factors a lot deeper.”