

Is coffee for the birds?

Shade-grown "bird-friendly" coffees help birds and the environment.

BY HOWARD MEYERSON

On winter days when birds flock to backyard feeders, it's not uncommon for people to sit with a cup of coffee and enjoy the winged mayhem in their yard. Backyard birdwatching is a popular U.S. pastime — meeting for coffee has become one, too.

Julie Craves hopes more people will connect the two activities. She writes Coffee & Conservation, coffeehabitat.com, an online project started in 2005 to educate people about bird conservation and bird-friendly coffees. She recommends buying brands that are certified as organic or bird-friendly.

"Birds and other animals live and flourish on coffee farms that offer a diversity of tree species, but sun-grown coffee habitat is poor (for birds)," says Craves, director of avian research at the Rouge River Bird Observatory at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.



Elfin-woods warbler

"Coffee is naturally an understory tree, one that grows under the shade of other canopy trees. There has been a push in recent decades to develop and plant higher-yielding varieties of coffee that grow in full sun. Not only are the forests and shade trees being cut down, but these sun coffee farms require more fertilizer and other chemicals like pesticides."

Buying bird-friendly brands sends an im-



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY DARRIN O'BRIEN (LEFT); MIKE MOREL/U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE (FAR LEFT)

portant message, according to Craves. It tells farmers, suppliers and retailers that customers will seek it out — and pay a bit more. The market then responds and makes the coffees more available and easier to find.

"That results in more coffee being grown that can help sustain birds," Craves said.

Coffee & Conservation was launched soon after Craves started drinking coffee in 2005. She knew of coffee habitat issues but was unable to find out how to buy coffee that didn't have a negative impact on the environment.

"Those habitat issues impacted the very birds I studied as an ornithologist," Craves said. "I was surprised the information wasn't summarized somewhere, so I decided to do it myself."

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BIRD-FRIENDLY RESOURCES

Looking for more places to learn about bird-friendly coffees? The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center bit.ly/SmithsonianBird and The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology bit.ly/CornellBirdLab are two to start with.

Craves' recent Coffee & Conservation post details the plight of the elfin-woods warbler, a rare bird found in Puerto Rico. It was discovered less than 50 years ago, and it thrives in a specialized habitat called elfin woods. Birdlife International, a global partnership of conservation organizations, estimates the population at 2,700.

The warblers are now listed as threatened on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Threatened and Endangered Species list. They are found in shade coffee plantations but not on sun coffee farms. Federal rules now encour-

age converting sun coffee farms to shade plantations. The conversion of shade coffee farms to sun is prohibited.

Coffee lovers will find volumes on Craves' site from coffee reviews and commentary on coffee makers to where to find coffees that meet bird-friendly or organic standards — Whole Foods Market is one example. A number of retailers, she said, carry "Birds and Beans" branded coffee, which is found at birdsandbeans.com.

Starbucks also is worthy, according to Craves. The company "buys and sells very

little certified coffee, but it maintains supplier standards that often exceed those of other major coffee certifications when it comes to environmental protection. They are very transparent about their criteria, and I'm pretty impressed with their work in this arena," Craves said.

Howard Meyerson is an award-winning writer and managing editor of Michigan BLUE Magazine.