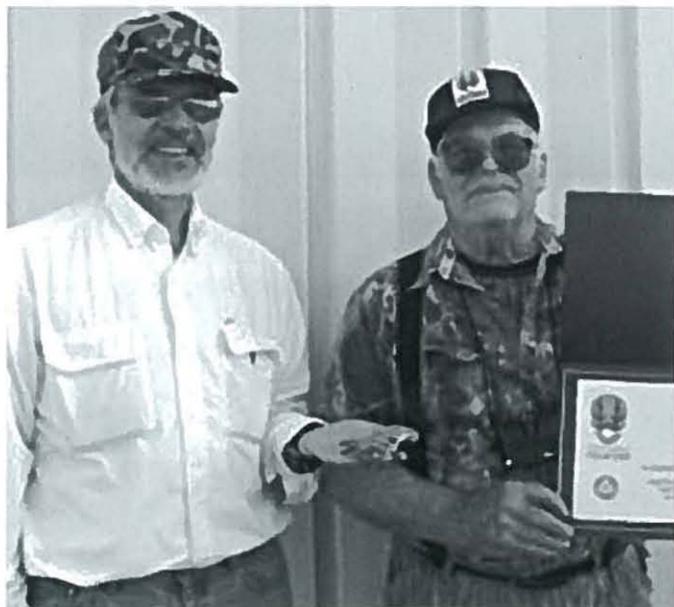


Luring in Cerulean Warblers

Honoring the volunteer spirit

What is it about the cerulean warbler – sometimes described as a “piece of sky” – that inspires people to trek out into the hot, buggy Arkansas woods in the middle of June? The story we’ll tell here – partly in his own rather succinct words – is that of a **Doc Weaver**, a retired general practitioner who has given his time and unique skills to the effort to pull a small bird back from the edge of extinction.



Paul Hamel (left) presents volunteer award to Dr. William J. “Doc” Weaver (right). (Photo by Wilks Wood)

The cerulean warbler, so named for the male's sky-blue plumage, is a neotropical migratory songbird. Making the long flight to the lower slopes of the Andes in August, cerulean warblers return in April or May to build nests and breed in the upper canopy of forests in the Eastern United States. Since 1966, populations of the species have declined an estimated 70 percent, the decline tied to the fragmentation and destruction of habitat in both breeding and winter ranges.

Paul Hamel, wildlife biologist with the SRS Center for Bottomland Hardwoods in Stoneville, MS, has been studying cerulean warblers and other neotropical migratory birds for more than two decades. In 1992, Hamel and fellow researchers started a long-term study of neotropical migratory birds on a timber industry-owned site in Desha County, AR, known to harbor cerulean warblers. The timber company, Anderson-Tully Company, has provided one of the only sites in the United States for long-term experiments on managing forests specifically for cerulean warblers and other neotropical migratory birds.

Doctor Weaver, I Presume

Every other year, Hamel, and fellow biologists go out

to the site in Desha County to attempt to capture cerulean warblers and other neotropical migratory birds for the study. They know there were cerulean warblers around from breeding season surveys, but they need to capture and band the birds to establish their patterns.

“We have a mediocre batting average,” admits Hamel. “One capture out of three setups is doing well. Ceruleans prefer to stay up high. You can coax them in, but if a nearby male starts singing up high they get distracted and don’t come down.”

Hamel routinely uses recordings of male cerulean warblers to coax rival males down from the tall perches they favor, but maybe seeing another male would get them closer.

Mike Staten, wildlife manager with Anderson-Tully who often accompanies Hamel on his surveys, wondered if a wooden decoy would work. But who could they get to carve one?

Staten just happened to have a neighbor in Lake Village, AR who might fit the ticket. Mike knew that **Dr. William J. “Doc” Weaver** had been carving animals and birds for some time, and thought he might be interested



Cerulean warbler decoy carved by Doc Weaver. (Photo by Wilks Wood)



From left to right: Paul Hamel, Doc Weaver, and Mike Staten. (Photo by Wilks Wood)

in the project. Weaver was indeed excited, and carved two decoys for the researchers to try out.

On June 17, 2008, they all headed out to the field—Weaver, Hamel, Staten, SRS technician Carl Smith III, and Wilks Wood, wildlife biology student at Delta State University in Cleveland, MS—to try out the decoys. After presenting Weaver with a certificate and hat honoring him as a Forest Service Volunteer, Hamel sat down with the retired doctor and talked to him about his wood-working.

What is your training?

I was a general practitioner for 40 years, and practiced in Eudora, AR, starting in 1955. I moved there after hunting quail in 1954. The quail hunting around Eudora was very good at that time. I retired in 1990.

How did you get interested in woodworking?

After retirement I went to Branson, MO, on a trip and saw some wood carvings of deer, birds, ducks, and got some tools, brought them home and tried it. I had a ceramic dog and I was able to make a copy of it in wood, and I really liked it as a retirement activity.

How long have you been doing the woodworking?

Since the early 1990s.

What sorts of woodwork do you do?

I have done mostly animals, but I'm not as good as real experts.

[Mike Staten points out that Weaver won an award for one of his wild turkey carvings.]

Lately I have been doing bowls by taking a block of green wood and hollowing it out, a technique I learned from a vet[erinarian] in south Mississippi. You have to put those bowls in a plastic bag to dry so they won't dry too fast and crack, but they can get moldy and stained, too, which is a difficult thing to control.

What kinds of wood do you carve?

Basswood [*Tilia* sp.], and tupelo [*Nyssa aquatica*].

What kind of wood did you use to carve the Cerulean Warblers?

Tupelo.

How long does it take to carve a decoy?

Half a day.

Whose work do you really like?

Nobody in particular.

Have you made decoys for other people, like ducks for hunters?

No, I don't do ducks because the carving of the feathers is so detailed and I can't do that like the real experts who carve duck decoys.

At the end of the fieldwork, everyone returned to their vehicles, where Weaver had sandwiches and chips his wife **Winnie** had prepared for everyone. Weaver's ready for more, ready to make decoys to lure in hermit thrushes and rusty blackbirds and more. "If you bring me a specimen, I'll make a decoy for you," he says.

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