Pitch: Feature on urban trees

What is a tree worth? Poets might object to the question, but in recent years scientists and urban planners have been finding answers—surprisingly specific ones. The shade from one large tree growing on the west side of a house cuts homeowners’ air-conditioning-related electricity use by up to 7 percent. Each of New York City’s half-million street trees removes 1.73 pounds of pollutants annually from the air, a benefit worth $9.02 per tree.

The new science of urban trees is a data-driven enterprise. By cataloguing not only the location but the characteristics and impacts of a city’s trees—how many sun- and heat-related health crises such as melanoma and congestive heart failure they prevent, the increased diversity of bird species they encourage—experts are quantifying the value of trees to both people and wildlife. Recent studies show that trees not only reduce flooding and air temperatures, they also lower people’s blood pressure and even ease grief, including that of post-9/11 mourners. Once considered a nuisance because of their leaf litter, smelly fruits, and tendency to fall on power lines, trees are gaining recognition for their ability to counteract many of a city’s ills, including the effects of climate change.

I plan to orient this story around a project that is beginning this summer in New York City. A group of scientists affiliated with the Forest Service’s new field station in Queens, led by research ecologist Richard Hallett, will fan out to parks, backyards, traffic islands, neighborhood gardens, cemeteries, and abandoned lots throughout the five boroughs to gather data on New York City’s urban tree population—the first-ever comprehensive study of the city’s trees. I will tag along on one of these outings and use those scenes as narrative anchors for the story, weaving into the tale diverse information gleaned from far-ranging interviews with experts. Sources I have already identified are research forester Dave Nowak of SUNY, one of the founders of urban tree science and the inventor of the i-Tree software tool that Hallett’s team will be using; social scientist Erica Svendsen, who studies the cultural and psychological value of urban trees; and ecologist Susannah Lerman of UMass Amherst who studies how urban trees nurture migrating and resident populations of birds as well as mammals, reptiles and amphibians. I have interviews scheduled next week with Nowak and Lerman, and intend to identify other experts once I dive into the reporting.

I am excited to get started on this story and look forward to working with Rene and other editors to make sure it has just the right tone and angle for Audubon.

Sincerely,

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