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## Memphis researchers keep data on 15,000 birds



Dr. Kelly Miller, postdoctoral researcher and program director, reaches in to untangle a male prothonotary warbler that she caught in a net next to one of the nests Dr. Keith Bowers and his team have placed within Meeman-Shelby State Forest in Millington on June 6. Miller works as part of the University of Memphis' Bowers Lab research team that studies field ornithology at the Meeman Biological Station.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS DAY/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

## Shelby Forest is 'where it's happening'

Jack Armstrong Memphis Commercial Appeal | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

Deep in Shelby Forest in the Memphis summer heat, two researchers stood with binoculars to their eyes. They were fixed on a bright yellow decoy on top of a wooden nest box on a pole about 50 feet away. They talked in low voices. A net was stretched in front of the box. ● After several minutes, a bird that matched the color of the decoy crashed into the net, caught by the feet, and it hung there, helpless. One researcher went and untangled the bird. ● Lead researcher Keith Bowers broke out his gear and started to measure the bird's foot. While kneeling in the dirt with a live bird held firm in one hand, he said he was reminded of a Renaissance painting, "The School of Athens." ● "Plato is pointing to the sky because he believed in this sort of heaven where there were perfect forms of everything, and everything on Earth is imperfect," Bowers said. "Standing next to him is his student, Aristotle, who has his hand extended...basically suggesting that everything we need to know is here on Earth. This is where it's happening."

For Bowers, one square mile in Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park, about half an hour from Downtown Memphis, is "where it's happening." He's the lead of the Bowers Lab at the University of Memphis, a long-term, individual-based study of bird species in the forest. The research focuses on birds, but raises questions with broader implications.

Bowers' domain includes a team of researchers, mostly students, and a plot of woods on the state forest's nearly 13,000 acres. The study site includes over 600 nest boxes and a field station equipped with a laboratory and a fleet of utility vehicles.

"I have absolutely loved my time with the lab," said Kelly Miller, a postdoctoral researcher who joined the lab in 2017. "It really opened my eyes to the natural world and how important these ecosystems are."

The Bowers Lab is concerned with the "Four F's" of biology — feeding, fighting, fleeing, and "the last one...it is what it is," Bowers said.

See BIRD STUDY, Page 12A



Dr. Keith Bowers records measurements in a log as he holds onto a male prothonotary warbler that he and Dr. Kelly Miller caught in a net next to one of the nests he and his team have placed within Meeman-Shelby State Forest in Millington on June 6. Miller works as part of the University of Memphis' Bowers Lab research team that studies field ornithology at the Meeman Biological Station.

## A small team making a big difference

### TN efforts to reintegrate former offenders are innovative, underfunded

Amos Maki  
MLK50: Justice Through Journalism

Leon Phillips grew up in a hard-scrabble family in rural Ohio, where his grandmother, known affectionately and a little fearfully as 'Big Momma,' preached from the gospel of hard work.

"I learned to work from 7 years old on up, and I haven't stopped working since," said Phillips. "I don't mind because I was raised to work."

Finding work became a chore after Phillips was incarcerated three times in three different states, with his last stint ending in 1996. Though potential employers did not explicitly tell Phillips his background cost him a job, he's sure it had an impact.

"It was subtle, but firm," said Phillips. "Any time they do a background search on you, it's going to be an issue."

Today, the 70-year-old is working part-time at a Mid-South Food Bank warehouse on Perkins Road near Lamar Avenue in Southeast Memphis thanks to the state-run American Jobs Center located at Cross-town Concourse and the Tennessee Office of Reentry, both of which fall under the umbrella of the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Most states help formerly-incarcerated people find work through the correction department, so Gov. Bill Lee's decision to house Tennessee's Office of Reentry in the labor department to boost job placement and retention was a novel idea when the office was established in 2021.

While the move has improved job placement support for justice-involved people across the state, local criminal justice reform and reentry advocates say the office could do much more if it had more power and better funding.

The office does not have any legal, regulatory or statutory authority to mandate changes in the public or private sectors. It had a budget of \$2.3 million for fiscal year 2025, and 10 employees, including four in its Nashville-based central office. By comparison, Tennessee's roughly \$60 billion state budget includes around \$1.5 billion for the Department of Correction. In fiscal year 2023, the DOC spent \$907 million on incarceration alone, 79% of its total budget for the year.

"I want to give credit where it is due," said Josh Spickler, executive director of Just City, the Memphis-based criminal justice reform organization. "The fact that they created this office, it's a good thing. It's progress, but it's a drop in the ocean (the state) created by constantly expanding the reach of the criminal legal system."

See REENTRY, Page 5A



The inside of cell block B is seen within the Shelby County Corrections Department in Memphis on June 18. CHRIS DAY/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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