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LARGER THAN LIFE

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SECTION C

Film warns of songbirds' decline

PATRICK LANGSTON

It's a heart-breaking piece of footage: a volunteer goes about her morning routine of retrieving tiny, dead songbirds from Toronto sidewalks as passersby hurry about their business. The cause of death? Migrating at night and confused by the bright lights of tall buildings, the birds died when they collided with windows.

The footage is part of Toronto-based filmmaker and multimedia artist Su Rynard's documentary *The Messenger*, which opens at the ByTowne Cinema on March 18. At once elegiac and a hopeful call to action, the award-winning film is an unsettling look at the plight of the world's songbirds, a vast and diverse range of creatures — warblers, orioles, thrushes, and tanager among them — whose population has shrunk by half since the 1960s. The decline seems a certain warning of dire environmental

things to come, a kind of canary in the coal mine of the planet's ecosystem.

The film journeys from the boreal forest to Germany to a coffee plantation in Costa Rica as it tracks reasons for the decline of songbirds, from habitat loss to the predation of domestic cats to the spreading use of the worrisome agricultural insecticide neonicotinoids. Along the way, we're treated to gorgeous footage of birds, the music of their songs, and commentary by a lively, committed group of ornithologists and others.

Rynard, whose earlier works include the dramatic feature film *Kardia*, says *The Messenger* grew out of the slow disappearance of songbirds from around her family's cottage.

"We used to say, 'Oh, why don't we see this or that bird anymore? Remember when we couldn't fall asleep because the whippoorwill were singing so loudly?'"

Reading *Silence of the Songbird*, by Bridget Stutchbury, one of the commentators in the film, let Rynard connect her personal experience to a worldwide phenomenon. From that came the film.

"We're trying to make an emotional experience and a cinematic experience," she says. "And to do that you strike a very fine balance between information and storytelling and the immersive experience of a film."

She's been successful in achieving that balance. Weaving facts (500 dead birds collected in two hours at just two Toronto skyscrapers) and digestible science (birds migrate thousands of miles at night using magnetic fields and celestial bodies to guide them) with a gripping narrative arc, Rynard tells a good, if disturbing story. She peppers it with uncertainties and reminders that help us forge a connection with a world we don't understand and with which, as

When: March 18 to 21
Where: ByTowne Cinema
Information: 613-789-3456, bytowne.ca

THE MESSENGER

urban dwellers, we have increasingly less contact.

"Could we live without birds? We don't know," says one commentator. "We forget we are part of the environment and that we depend on it for our lives," says another.

Not one to belt us over the head with guilt or righteousness, Rynard and co-writer Sally Blake also recognize the Gordian knot that is the relationship between man and nature.

In France, for example, voice is given to hunters and eaters of a traditional tiny avian delicacy, the ortolan bunting. With its numbers reportedly plunging even though hunting it is banned in the European Union, the bird continues to show up on dinner plates.

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The Messenger is a documentary about the plight of songbirds.

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SONGBIRDS FROM **C7**

By filming hunters and eaters (you may have to turn your head at the latter), Rynard sought to show "how complex these things are. Tradition overrules the ability to take in new information."

Acting as a kind of anchor to the film are the astounding intermittent clips of migratory birds in flight. They are shown in slow motion, their wings spreading, flapping powerfully, then coming to rest as the birds glide. It's profoundly moving.

That filming was done in wind tunnels at Western University's Advanced Facility for Avian Research, Rynard says required scientists to habituate the birds to the wind tunnel and her to film in near darkness.

"The whole shoot you're really nervous because it's such a big investment. The most rewarding moment was when the scientists there looked at the footage; they were, 'Wow! This is amazing!'"

Rynard hopes the film, which was nominated for a 2016 Canadian Screen Award for Best Cinematography in a Feature Length Documentary, will incite us to action. "Conservation does work," she says.

As to her own favourite songbird, she says it's the ubiquitous white-throated sparrow. "It's just so simple. It reminds me of summer. It's like a friend: It doesn't feel exotic; it feels like home."