

## A Birding Interview with Pete Dunne

Pete Dunne has come a long way since his low-rent birding days of the 1970s. Today, he represents one of the guiding lights of American birding as a prolific author, magazine and newspaper columnist, lecturer, Director of the New Jersey Audubon Society's prestigious Cape May Bird Observatory, and founder of the World Series of Birding. Dunne's eleven books—including *Tales of a Low-rent Birder*, *Hawks in Flight*, *The Wind Masters*, *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion*, *Pete Dunne on Birdwatching*, and *The Feather Quest*—inspire readers with a passion for birding and respect for the natural world.

In this spirited *Birding* interview, Dunne comes clean about his real reason for starting the World Series of Birding, advises birders on feather quests and binoculars, and explains how to wrap an environmental message in feathers.

— Noah K. Strycker

**Birding:** Why did you consider yourself a “low-rent birder”?

**Pete Dunne:** I didn't “consider” myself a low-rent birder. I *was* a low-rent birder. When I first started to work for New Jersey Audubon in 1976, my “salary” was \$250 per month. No bennies—except for the overriding fact that I got to live and work in Cape May. Heck, I would have paid New Jersey Audubon for the privilege—not that I would have told them that. And, no, I don't have the benefit of a trust fund. Oh, and something else: Almost all the vitamins and minerals you need to keep body and soul conjoined can be found in a cheese steak hoagie. Ask for extra everything on top. Instant coffee will make up the nutritional balance.

**Birding:** How did you get hooked on birding?

**PD:** In quick sum, I had my dad's binoculars, and I had several hundred acres of township-owned

woodland that started at our back door. I had the latitude to wander those woodlands at will. I really feel sorry for young birders growing up today who don't have this latitude. Y'know, if today's parents let their kids get up in the dark and wander around in the woods till dinnertime, they'd be put in jail.

**Birding:** How did you get your start in Cape May?

**PD:** In the fall of 1975, I walked in to New Jersey Audubon Society's Lorrimer Sanctuary. I told the director, “I'd like to do a spring hawk count on the Kittatinny Ridge for you.” He said, “Super.” I asked, “How much?” He said, “\$350.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “Super.” Yeah, I know the Kittatinny Ridge is on the other side of the state. But CMBO was in the cards for me. In April 1976, I got a call from Rich Kane, Research Director for New Jersey Audubon, who told me that the organization was going to start a Cape May Bird Observatory and was shopping for a hawk counter. I was heir apparent. I said, “Super.” I was contacted by founding director Bill Clark. I was hired with a grant from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for \$500 for three months, seven days a week, minus the mandatory \$10 to become a CMBO member. When Bill moved on to the National Wildlife Federation, I stayed. So there you have it: I got my start in Cape May through brashness, good fortune, and default.

**Birding:** As Director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, what do you want to achieve?

**PD:** My guiding objective has been to use the great birding opportunities at Cape May to get as many people as possible jazzed about birds and the environment. Research has its own agenda, but it is legitimizing. Everything else—education, conservation, recreation—rides in the same cart. But first you have to make people aware that the possibility—wrapped in feathers—exists all around them. In Cape May, things with feathers are all around you. It's a peninsula filled with props.

**Birding:** How were you influenced by the great naturalist Roger Tory Peterson, with whom you have been compared?

**PD:** I have been compared with Roger? That's very flattering, but Roger was an icon and a pioneer. I'm just a scribe. The plain fact is that I was influenced by Roger even before I recognized his name. It was Roger who was in charge of (and wrote many of) the Junior Audubon Club species accounts that I squandered my nickels and dimes on when I was a kid. It was Roger who wrote the essay "What Bird is That?" in the National Geographic Society's book, *Song and Garden Birds*, that served as my field guide. I think it's fair to say that Roger's influence permeated all aspects of birding when I was a fledgling and that it continues to do so today.

**Birding:** What were the high points and low points of your "Feather Quest"—the year that you followed the birds around the United States with your wife Linda?

**PD:** High Point: Doing it. Low Point: Finishing it. All birders deserve the privilege of their own personal Feather Quest—and I hope everyone has one.

**Birding:** Why did you start the World Series of Birding in 1984?

**PD:** I suppose you want an honest answer, right? Okay. The reason I started the World Series of Birding was for the team of Pete Bacinski, Bill Boyle, David Sibley, and Pete Dunne to break the 200-species barrier. Only in Texas and California had the feat been accomplished, as of 1983. Our best had been 197. We figured a friendly competition would give us the oomph to get over the top. Adding Roger Tory Peterson to the team didn't hurt.

How's that for candor? The fact that it would bring lots of media attention to the beauty and importance of New Jersey's natural areas and raise a lot of money for New Jersey Audubon and participating teams were supportive reasons, not the cause. I am frankly amazed that this event has grown so much.

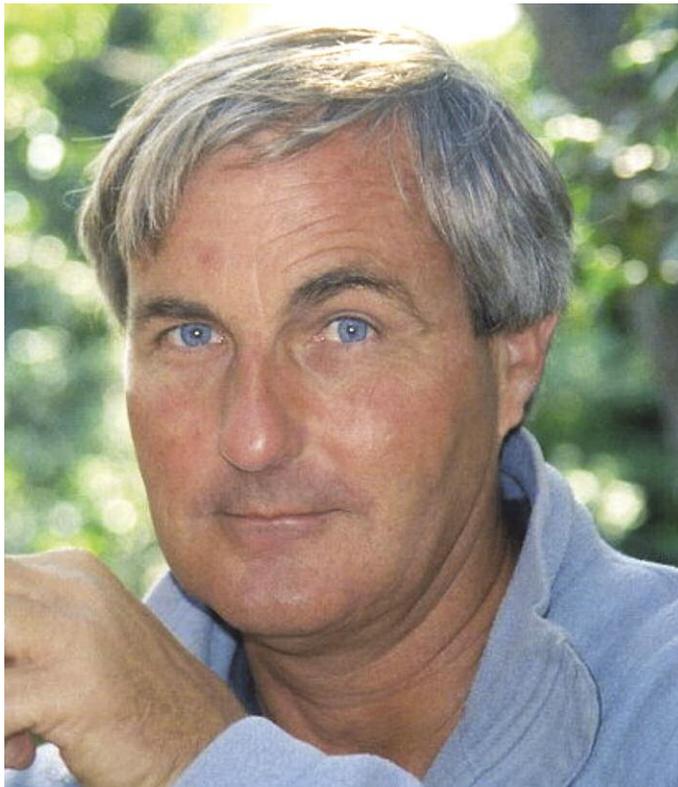
**Birding:** What inspired you to write a guide for new birders?

**PD:** I wrote *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion* because I thought I had something to add to the dynamic that is bird identification. I've always been focused on bird behavior, and I learned, without realizing I was learning anything, that what birds do and how and where they do it can be as diagnostic as plumage-related field marks. And often a heck of a lot easier to see. I am very much a "jizz" birder, as most experienced birders are. When birding veter-

erans identify a distant, smallish, slender, nimble, songbird working through the branches of a Siberian elm in Crow Valley Campground in late May, they are very probably not doing it by plumage. They are doing it by integrating a series of hints and clues. Plumage is the backup, not the point of departure. What I attempted to do in the *Field Guide Companion* was package the process that experienced birders bring to bear. As I have come to understand the matter, bird identifications are not made by eyes or ears. The primary tool of birding is the brain.

**Birding:** What optical equipment do you recommend for beginning, intermediate, and advanced birders?

**PD:** I heartily recommend that beginning birders acquire 7× or 8× instruments that offer a wide field of view (at least 320 feet at 1,000 yards), close focus to 8 feet, good depth of field, and a well-positioned focus wheel that is quick and responsive (that is, goes the full range of focus in less than 1½ rotations). There are some superb 10× instruments out there. But they cost plenty and they are not as versatile or user-friendly as good-quality instruments with lower power. My advice for climbing the glass ladder? Buy good-quality birding binoculars first. Buy the spotting scope later. Buy the Alpha birding binocular (the one they will put in your coffin) later. Then again, if you are not a "low-rent birder," buy the best right off the line. Even more than expert birders, beginning birders need the advantage of high-



**Pete Dunne.** Photo courtesy of © CMBO archives.

quality equipment. What do I use, right now? I think the Leica Ultravids are hard to beat and almost impossible to beat up. I took a tumble out of a bush plane in Alaska last summer, fell face first into a gravel bar and flat on a pair of Leica 7×42 Ultravids. Bins were fine. Ribs took a beating. I'm also partial to the Zeiss FLs: very bright, very sharp, very flat field edge-to-edge. The Zeiss 65mm spotting scope is also a stellar performer—and in the matte green finish it's got lots of curbside appeal.

*Birding:* What is your next big project?

**PD:** I'm going to write this year's membership renewal letter for CMBO members. What could be more important than that? Oh, you mean, like, book projects? Well, Linda and I are currently working on a book entitled *Prairie Spring*. It will be followed by *Arctic Autumn*, which will be followed by...see the pattern here? We're having a blast. And I think the writing will show that.