

A Birding Interview with Jon L. Dunn

A birding tour leader for more than 30 years and chief consultant for all five editions of the groundbreaking *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Jon L. Dunn is a major force in North American birding. Dunn coauthored *Peterson Field Guides: Warblers, Gulls of the Americas*, and *Birding Essentials*; he has written numerous identification articles; and he acts as host for the *Advanced Birding Video Series*. He is considered one of the primary experts on the field identification and distribution of birds in North America, having served on the American Birding Association (ABA) Checklist Committee, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, and the California and Ohio Bird Records Committees.

Between globetrotting avian excursions, Dunn talked with *Birding* about the perfect field guide, owning up to mistakes, and trying to forget the one that got away.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: You became a full-time birder at the age of 11—how was that possible?

Jon Dunn: I actually identified my first birds at age 8 after I became completely captivated by a male Hooded Oriole that was in our yard in suburban Los Angeles.

It was the spring of 1966 when I became hooked. I went on a San Fernando Valley Audubon Society walk to Descanso Gardens. Two weeks later I went on another. I was completely captivated, and my dad was good enough to take me on field trips. He brought a paperback along to read to fill the hours.

Birding: How would you describe your “job”?

JD: I have several jobs, I guess. I have led tours for WINGS since 1977, full-time since 1979. I suppose that has always been my most “stable” job. Otherwise, I’m involved in writing or researching for var-

ious publications. The National Geographic Society has provided me with a good deal of work on all five editions of their field guide. The 1st, 3rd, and 5th required the most work, and one can fairly easily tell that the revisions there were substantial. Probably the two projects I worked hardest on were *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution* (published by the Los Angeles Audubon Society in 1981) and the Houghton Mifflin warbler guide. With Kimball Garrett I spent a dozen years on the warbler project, although we pretty well scrapped what we had done after the first five years and started over. I’m pleased with the result.

Birding: What is your idea of a perfect field guide?

JD: It doesn’t exist, but I suppose the Mullarney et al. *Collins Guide to the Birds of Europe* is about the closest. It is simply breathtaking and absolutely packed with useful information.

Birding: Is there a 6th edition in the works for the National Geographic field guide?

JD: I am authorized to say that we are planning on a 6th edition for 2010 or 2011. There will be a number of plates redone and we will have a whack at the text again. There will be annotations on the plates and we are aiming to have subspecies maps for a number of the species.

Birding: From your heady California days of the 1960s and 1970s to the present, what changes have you seen in American birding?

JD: What strikes me most about the difference now is the level of communication. Folks are better informed as to what’s around. Browsing websites can be done in seconds for nearly any part of the world. But with so much information, there is also so much *misinformation*. You have to be cautious and do a good deal of screening. I’m not sure birders are any more careful today in the field than before. In fact, I tend to believe that the reverse is the case. But at least there’s more firm evidence to evaluate in the form of photos.

Birding: Out of all your birding discoveries, which one stands out as the most satisfying? How about the one that got away?

JD: I was on a boat with Kimball Garrett and others when we believed we found the first Greater Shearwater for the West Coast. But that didn't bring much pleasure later. Though accepted, it was controversial and still is. A Gray-tailed Tattler near Lancaster, Mohave Desert in Los Angeles County, in 1981 stayed long enough to be seen and photographed by others. When it first jumped, I recall thinking, "Great, that's my first Wandering Tattler at this well-worked location for shorebirds." But then it called, and I thought, "Oh, oh, it's Polynesian," an earlier English name. The calls are that distinct.

I try to forget the ones that got away. I remember seeing a bird briefly with Guy McCaskie and Lee Jones on San Nicolas Island that we believed was a female Cerulean Warbler. Cerulean is probably the rarest of the eastern warblers to reach California. There it was on the ground at the terminal and then it was off headed to Hawaii! But there was no way that our views substantiated the sighting. You have to forget these sightings both for your own sanity and for the sake of the accuracy of the ornithological record.

Birding: Have you been embarrassed by a misidentification? Could recent reports of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker be mistaken?

JD: I'm always embarrassed by misidentifications and I firmly believe that everyone should remember their errors. I'm amazed by those who make an incredible blunder brought about by quick views and rushing to judgment. Even when proved wrong, they don't learn. They are back at it again the next week or the next month. We all know the birders who are reliable from the ones who aren't.

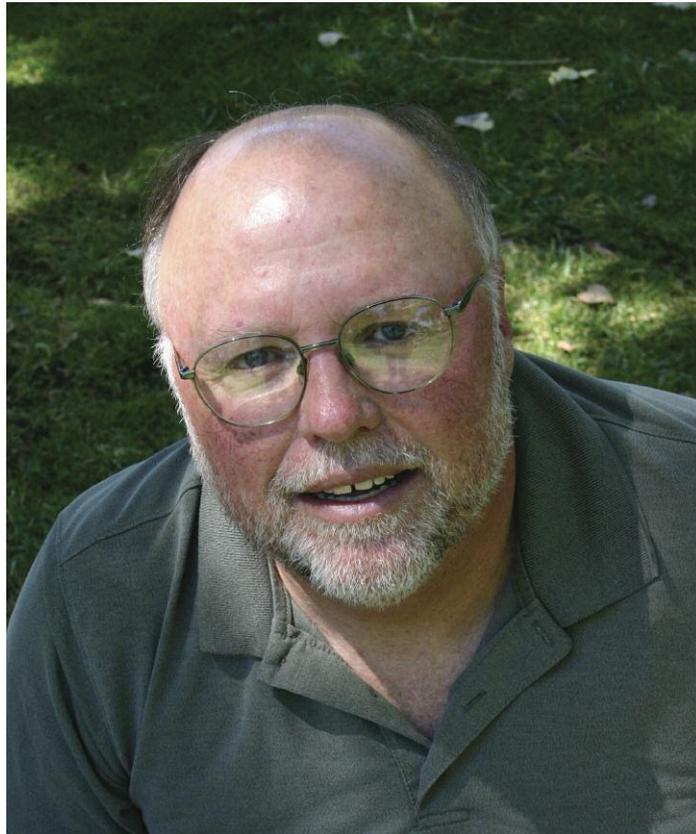
A good reputation really means something in the birding world. One of the most famous misidentifications was of a bird that would have been California's first Smith's Longspur—except that it turned out later to be a Sky Lark. Laurie Binford was the inspector on that one and suspected early on that it was a lark. I was with the last group to see the Smith's Longspur before Laurie sprang his trap. He gave me an hour. I failed! It was a searing learning experience.

Of course I have made mistakes since then, but it is *essential* to always question your identifications and ask yourself, "Is there any way I could have been wrong?" And then let them go and admit that maybe you were wrong, or just say, "I was wrong." And as we get older, our abilities slip. I know my hearing is declining. Fortunately, my eyes are still good. I hope to compensate with a dose of common sense.

As for the Ivory-bill, I have great respect for individuals on both sides of the debate. I have no issues with Cornell going public in the way that they did. The word was leaked and, since they believed the evidence, they had an obligation to go forward. I naturally believed it, even

though I never could make sense of the so-called definitive video. In 30+ years on various records committees I've never seen worse photo evidence. Frankly, I'm amazed at how much detail folks claim to see from so little evidence. More important, though, is that nothing more solid has emerged. These days, when a rarity is found, there are photos posted in no time flat, often the same day. It's beyond stretching reality to say that, with all of the researchers out there with cameras, somehow these birds have evaded us. Of course, I'll celebrate when I'm shown definitive evidence.

With the presumably extinct species—Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Eskimo Curlew, and Bachman's Warbler—unless there's firm evidence, it's just another story. I wonder how many decades had to go by before we stopped hearing



Jon Dunn. Photo courtesy of © WINGS.

about Passenger Pigeons and Carolina Parakeets. We all hope and want to believe, but at a certain point we just have to face reality. Every day and month that goes by with no firm evidence on Ivory-bills is another nail in the coffin.

Birding: Can you comment on the importance of understanding geographic and seasonal patterns of occurrence?

JD: I can cite numerous examples of the importance of learning distribution, but here are just two of them. In the Pacific states, Common Nighthawks don't arrive until late May, and most don't show up until June. So any sighting before 20 May is immediately suspect. In the East, Orange-crowned Warbler is the latest fall migrant warbler, with the earliest credible Pt. Pelee record on 17 September and a peak there around 10 October. Yet there are scores of late August and early September reports all over the East and Midwest. Are they all wrong? You bet. None is documented by photos.

Birding: Why have you dedicated so much of your life to education?

JD: I've always enjoyed sorting out my own thoughts and then putting them out for others to evaluate. Helping young birders is a special passion. We all have our own ideas about how to do birding right and how to help make a young person a better birder. I guess we want to pass on our philosophies. Each of us brings our own special approach and beliefs. That's how it should be. It's important to me that there be a large and competent new generation to take over after we're gone. Every kid needs a passion, so why not birds? Besides, the more birders there are, especially those who are passionate with a voice, the better chance we have of advocating positions in the political arena that actually might save birds.