

Interviewer: Today is April 21st, 2022, and I, Jim Winn, am speaking with Harvey Patten. He was the first President of the Houston Audubon Society, 1969 to 1970. The first thing that I would like to ask you is what you did in your so-called day job, what you did before you became involved with Houston Audubon?

Harvey Patten: I moved to Houston in 1969, and I was employed by Shell Oil Company as a paleontologist. Actually, I studied palynology, which is a study of fossil pollen and spores. You know, it's kind of a branch of paleo, which is a branch of geology. So basically, I had my college degrees in geology.

Interviewer: And did Shell transfer you out of town or out of state before your term with Houston Audubon completed?

Harvey Patten: Apparently. They transferred me over here in 1970, and I don't know what my position with Houston Audubon was at the time. All the details have gone by the wayside. I just turned 90 last week.

Interviewer: Oh, congratulations.

Harvey Patten: So, some details might be a little fuzzy. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: Sure. Well, I'll tell you what we can do. I've got a list of people that supposedly helped you on the Board, and shows that you were President from 1969 to sometimes in 1970, and why don't I read the list of those people, and if any of them are familiar and anything you can tell us about them, you can do so.

Harvey Patten: Well, you know, I remember quite a few of the people that you're going to read off probably, but I don't think I'd be able to tell you much about them. You know, other than that the relationship we had in birding, but anyway, give us your best shot. We'll see what I can do.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, the first man is a man is Armand Yramategui.

Harvey Patten: Yes. Armand Yramategui. He was employed at the Museum of Natural History. Carl Aiken was also an employee over there, and that actually may be — I was trying to reflect back as to how I even came into contact with the precursor to the Audubon, which was the bird study group of the Outdoor Nature Club. And I don't remember how I found out about that, but Armand was my Vice President when I was elected president, and as you may recall or you may not know, he was killed in an automobile accident on the highways in the Houston area. So that's really all I know about him really.

Interviewer: Okay. Dr. Mary Sears?

Harvey Patten: Only by name, as an acquaintance.

Interviewer: Norma Oates?

Harvey Patten: Yeah, Norma — we were very close, and she was my secretary, and did a lot of the leg work in that area for me as we were in the process of trying to get the Houston Audubon Society up and running. So, Norma — we worked very close together.

Interviewer: Dirk Hagemeyer, the Treasurer?

Harvey Patten: I only recognize the name. Dirk Hagemeyer, that's correct. I'm trying to get mental pictures of these people as you mention them, and his doesn't come up on my mental computer. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: Dr. Patricia Sullivan.

Harvey Patten: Here again just a person that I birded with, even though she may have been on the organizational committee, we didn't have a lot of outside experiences together, outside of getting the organization going.

Interviewer: Margaret Anderson?

Harvey Patten: Yeah, that's a name out of the past. Margaret Anderson, here again, I can't really tell you much about Margaret. I remember the name.

Interviewer: Katrina Ladwig?

Harvey Patten: Here again, I remember the name, but not the person. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: Let's go to how it was that you became president. How did that happen?

Harvey Patten: Before that, let me mention a couple of other people that I think were involved in the long term, Jerry and Nancy Strickling, who later in their years moved out to Arizona. Louise and Henry Hoffman, we were very close. These four individuals were all in the Outdoor Nature Club, and as a matter of fact I have a movie of an offshore trip we took out of Galveston, which features Jerry and Nancy in the movie, also David Marrack was involved in the organization. How did we get started? Well, I'm not really sure, except that we knew Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olin_Sewall_Pettingill_Jr.

I think most of us had membership in the National Audubon Society, and we knew that he was the — I'm not sure the right word at the time, but he was not the caretaker, but he was one of the officers that were monitoring and keeping track of the National Audubon refugees along the Texas coast.

So here again we communicated I guess directly with him, and this is where Norma Oats may come into play. I really don't remember how we did it, but Olin Sewall agreed to attend an organizational meeting that we held in Houston at that time, and I think there were 18 or 19 organizational members. So, he did come, and he was the primary speaker, and I had never done anything like this. You talk about being an introvert, at that time I was not accustomed to public speaking, or standing in front of people, or anything like that, but that changed over the years as I became involved in Boy Scouting, and church activities, and leading, singing in a local church here. So, I've become more of a conversant person, my brother and I. My brother was 91 in January, retired from the University of Georgia, and we speak regularly. So, he and I have some interesting conversations, reminiscing on the past.

But getting back to the organization, we met in the large auditorium, and all I can say is I was nervous, okay, probably. I had mentioned to the people as I looked out over the audience that there was no smoking in the auditorium, as an announcement, and there may have been one or two other announcements, but I'm not sure, and I turned around and looked, and here was Dr. Pettingill with a cigarette lit up holding it in his hand, and he had been smoking, and everybody laughed, right, I turned around, and I looked at him, and that broke the ice really. We became more informal at that time and got on with the meeting. So, it was a good time.

Interviewer: Tell us, how is it that you became president?

Harvey Patten: Weakness, I guess. *[Laughter]* Maybe nobody else wanted the job. I don't know. As I got involved with the organization in taking field trips and things of that nature, somewhere along the line I became the compiler of the Christmas bird count.

And that would have been in the '60s, because I moved over here in 1970. So that would have been in the '60s, and following the countdowns every year, we would have a countdown at Linda Snyder's house. She had a home in Baytown, and whenever that was available we would congregate at her house in the evening for a light meal, and then the countdown of the species. And I conducted those Audubon Christmas counts for several years, I don't know how many, and I know those records would be published in the old National Audubon magazines in the archives. And maybe it was because of that leadership that someone decided "Hey, Harvey might be a good guy to talk into this job." *[Laughs]* I'm not really sure how it really came about, but it was a fun time.

It was a fun time. It was a time when people like Victor Emanuel, who I got to meet, and have known for many, many years, I took a nice field

trip to El Tiempo with Victor one year, years ago, and I haven't talked with him or — I've been out of birding now for quite a few years. But we go back a long time. Victor used to come to the countdowns. He was in college at the time, so he was never really available for any official type of responsibilities.

And he would work an area over near — oh, I forget the name of it, the town over in the East side of the Christmas count area, with Ollie McKay. Do you remember that name? I think it's M-C-K-A-Y, and Ollie would never bird with anyone else in that area, except with Victor. Victor was the only one that Ollie allowed to participate in the Christmas count with him. So that's an interesting story to tell.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Yeah, it sounds like it would be. Well, your interest in birds goes back a ways then.

Harvey Patten: Yeah, it does. You know, I met Ollie one time. This has to do with the Eskimo Curlew exploits that Victor Emanuel and — oh mercy, his name just escaped me. There was another fellow that birded with Victor all the time, when they discovered the Eskimo Curlew on Galveston Island.¹

And the one year — I'm not sure when — I think it was 1957, and like I said, I moved — oh, in 1959 maybe. I moved to Houston in '59, and it may have been the spring of 1960 or 1961. Well, I can look at my — matter of fact, while I'm talking to you, I'm going to go get my notebook, and I can tell you exactly the day that I saw the Eskimo Curlew.

Interviewer: Oh, great.

Harvey Patten: And I called Jerry Strickling in Houston and told him at that time, and he spread the word, and I was still — yeah, he was in Houston, I was in Galveston, and Ollie McKay came over from his location, and also the ornithologist from Louisiana State University at that time, whom I met at the time came also.

But I'm going to just take a look back here and see if I can find Eskimo Curlew in my note here. [Laughs]

¹ This article from *The Auk* appears to indicate that the person who Mr. Patten was trying to recall was Stephen G. Williams.

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General Notes

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States, I discovered a specimen of the Yellow-green Vireo (*Vireo flavoviridis*) taken by Mr. Kimball on 9 May 1933. Unfortunately, there is no locality given on the original label. After checking through old correspondence both to and from Mr. Kimball, it appears that he spent the years 1935 to 1944 in Matagorda, Matagorda County, Texas. Although it is impossible to state with certainty that the bird was collected there, it seems from statements by Mr. Kimball and others that he did not travel much when established in a locality, especially in his later years.

In his summary of the literature, Monroe (*Auk*, 76, 1959: 95-96) lists three other specimens from the United States.—LARRY L. WOLF, *The University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Ann Arbor, Michigan*.

Another Probable Record of an Eskimo Curlew on Galveston Island, Texas.

—At 4 P.M. on 3 April 1960 Mr. Carl H. Aiken III, Mr. Stephen G. Williams, and I observed, at a distance of about 150 meters, what we identified as an Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*) among four Whimbrels (*N. phaeopus*) in a pasture on Galveston Island. We studied the Eskimo Curlew for two minutes through a Bushnell 25x spotting scope and a 30x Balscope before it flew out of sight down the island. A little later Mrs. Jerry B. Strickling drove up and informed us that her party had found an Eskimo Curlew in a nearby pasture. Mr. and Mrs. Strickling, Mr. and Mrs. Henry S. Hoffman, Aiken, Williams, and I studied this bird at leisure in excellent light through the spotting scopes at a distance of 300 meters. It fed on well-drained ground where the grass was about eight cm. high. A Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) and a Long-billed Curlew (*N. americanus*), feeding nearby, were observed several times with the Eskimo Curlew in the field of the scope.

The most striking marks of the bird in question were the very thin, short bill (the Whimbrel is a decidedly thick-billed bird), the small size (about that of a Golden Plover), and the general buffy coloration. The buffiness was most prominent on the crissum and lower abdomen, but the feathers of the back and the secondaries appeared to be edged with buff, giving the bird an over-all darker appearance than that of the Whimbrel. The hind neck and back were delicately streaked. The crown appeared uniform brown with a thin, indistinct, medial stripe. The line through the eye was brown and the superciliary line light buff.

During April 1959 I studied on four occasions the Eskimo Curlew reported by George G. Williams (*Auk*, 76: 539-41). The Stricklings also saw the Eskimo Curlew reported by Williams. The possibility must be considered that the bird we identified as an Eskimo curlew could have been a Least Curlew (*N. minutus*), since the two species are almost identical in the field. However, as Williams noted in his article, the Least Curlew is an Asiatic-Australian species that has never been recorded in North America and is most improbable in spring in southern Texas. The possibility also exists that the bird in question was an abnormally small Whimbrel, but I believe this is highly unlikely since it possessed characters such as buffy coloration and a very thin beak, which the Whimbrel lacks. Within these limits of probability, I am convinced that the bird I saw on 3 April 1960 was an Eskimo Curlew. All observers mentioned here concur in this identification.

The fact that a curlew pronouncedly smaller than a Whimbrel and with a much shorter and thinner bill was observed on Galveston Island in two successive years heightens the probability that this bird was an Eskimo Curlew rather than a Least Curlew.

Interviewer: Yeah. I didn't know that you had seen the Eskimo Curlew. That's good news.

Harvey Patten: I was the first one to see it that spring, and well, I have another binder where I can find it. Here it is. Eskimo Curlew on March 30th, 1961.

Interviewer: Wow.

Harvey Patten: Yep. The only new life bird at that time. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: Well, was that the first time the bird had been seen in the coast down here?

Harvey Patten: No, as I mentioned, a year or two before that, Victor Emanuel and one other person, whose name escapes me right now, located it. It was either the previous year, 1960, or 1959.

Interviewer: Where you interested in birds as a child, or —

Harvey Patten: I became a birder as a result of growing up in New Jersey with my brother. We had to satisfy the requirements for the Boy Scout Eagle Scout award.

We had to identify 21 birds at that time, and I was, I think, 14. Here again my list that I'm looking at now shows my first life bird on July 7th, 1945. I had Scarlet Tanager and Killdeer that year. *[Laughter]* 1945, so I would have been 13 years old. So, I've been birding all my life.

Interviewer: Yeah. My observation is the best birders today are the ones that start at that age, teenage years or before.

Harvey Patten: You know, I could tell you a story. I don't mean to interrupt you, but people today in learning how to identify have all kinds of technological advances that they use.

In the last couple of days, there was a blurb on the Louisiana newsletter - and I'm not talking against any of these people, and I'm not going to mention their names, because I don't know them personally, but it has to do with the use of — I guess this app that you can get on your phones called Merlin. I'm not familiar with it. I don't use it, but apparently people are using Merlin to identify by sight and identify by sound, things of that nature, and that's all well and good. This is a different time. But my story is, if you care to hear it —

Interviewer: We do.

Harvey Patten: When I was a boy, I would go out, here again searching for birds to satisfy the requirements for bird studying merit badge to become an Eagle Scout, and I would hear something. At that time, all I had was a little plastic three power telescope that my dad had bought my brother and I one year for Christmas. Didn't have any binoculars, and I would go out. When I would hear something, I would track it down until I could get a decent view of it. Then when I got home, I would look through my first Petersons, and begin to just look through it. I had no idea anything

about what family it might have been, whether it was a hawk or a sparrow or woodpecker, whatever.

But if I could locate the bird in the field and track it down by looking at the plate later on, or even after hearing it, then that's the way I learn birds.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, I think people still do that today, particularly with photography.

Harvey Patten: Yeah.

Interviewer: Take the photo home and look it up.

Harvey Patten: Right. Good.

Interviewer: But they've got a lot more technology to do that today than you had.
[Laughs]

Harvey Patten: I had one book. And really there were no people to call. A couple of years later, I met a man who worked in New York City, and he lived in a neighboring town by the name of William Downin, D-O-W-N-I-N, and Bill called me — I don't know how we came in contact with each other, but he called me one day and asked me if I would like to go birding, and he took me down to the seashore of New Jersey, which again broadened my experience.

By that time, I did have a pair of binoculars, but Bill Downin was instrumental in helping me with some of my early birding experiences. But other than that, I'm self-taught basically is what it amounts to.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, the seashore is a difficult place for many of us to learn birds.

Harvey Patten: When I lived in Houston, much to my wife's chagrin, I think, I spent a lot of time in Galveston, and I made it a point to specialize in shore birds and that time, and when I came over to Louisiana, working the rice fields in Tammany Parish close to the Texas border, I was able to extend my knowledge of the shore birding in this area.

I've forgotten a lot of that since I'm no longer in the field. It's amazing how fast you forget the important points of identification.

Interviewer: Do you remember bird calls? At that time, could you remember them?

Harvey Patten: Yeah. As a matter of fact, my birding, I sit outside most every day, and my lists in my yard are about 23 or 24 species, and many of those were initially hearing them. I don't wear hearing aids. I do have hearing loss,

but I know in the wintertime I have lost the ability to hear Golden-crowned Kinglets and also Cedar Waxwings.

I always used to hear Golden-crowns here in my yard before seeing them. I used to hear them first, and also see the Waxwings, and now that's no longer the case.

But I still bird by ear if I'm close enough. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: That's remarkable. Well, I'm about running out of specific things to ask you. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or mention?

Harvey Patten: There was one activity — my brother and I took an island trip in his camper. He came down when we were younger, and we went to Galveston. We camped overnight in Galveston, but on that trip we stopped in High Island during the spring migration, and we got to meet some of the people, and I guess there were some people who I didn't know, who were members of the Houston Audubon, and my brother was — I'm not going to dwell on his worldwide knowledge as an academician. He's well-known in his field, or of systems of ecology around the world.

So, my brother is always one of those that is a name dropper type of person. Anyway, we met these people, and Bernie said "Why don't you tell them that you were the first person —" and I said "No, they don't need to know that." *[Laughter]* So my brother went over and told them.

Interviewer: Sure, he did, huh?

Harvey Patten: And that was on that island trip that we took. So that was interesting. But other than that, I'll tell you Jim, I couldn't have selected a better hobby to have filled my long days. I was 90 years old last Wednesday, a week ago, and I continue to bird just around the yard now, and it's been a wonderful hobby. I've met some wonderful, wonderful people, and they've helped me along the way, and many of them are gone on and are no longer living on the Earth these days. They've gone on to better, greener pastures, where my wife is. She passed away about a year and a half ago now, and I'm rushing to catch up. *[Laughter]* And we're born-again Christians, my wife and I, and so I know I'm going to be going, but the birding people have filled my life. Here in the Covington area, up until this past winter since 1990, every winter there's been a lady that has banded birds here at my house for the winter, a bird banding program that we had in Louisiana, and she's finally given that up this winter, and I only had two Rufous hummingbirds in any case, so they've not been presented very well the last couple of years. Maybe things will turn around, but we'll see. But anyway, all of those experiences that I've had with the people, I've been blessed, and I'm sorry that I've never met you and Julie personally, but I consider you as close friends already.

Interviewer: Well, thank you. It's a real privilege for us. I'll tell you, it's humbling, and it's a real privilege. I've always felt like the most interesting people in the world are birders, and people in Audubon are — it's a very diverse group, and I've never met anyone that you can't find a lot about to like.

Harvey Patten: That's true. You know, one other person I want to mention is John O'Neill. I'm sure you know John's name.

Interviewer: Yes, the artist?

Harvey Patten: Maybe you know the person? John was just a student in Houston, high school student, when I met him and of course, he went on to Oklahoma and got his master's degree and PhD from Louisiana State University and later ran the LSU Museum of Natural Science. So, John and I had a very long-term relationship, and I've lost track of him since he left LSU. I know he went back to Texas. I don't know really where he's living in Texas, but John was one of my early friends, and along with Victor and Carl Aiken at the museum at that time, and all of the others that we mentioned.

Interviewer: I just want you to know, we really appreciate this time speaking with you. There's going to be a lot of people that will find this very interesting, and we're grateful for you for doing this with us.

Harvey Patten: My one advice to all your folks, throw away the tech, and get out there, and bird by ear, and bird by sight. There you go.

Interviewer: There you go. *[Laughter]*

Harvey Patten: Throw away the technology. *[Laughter]* I'm old school, so anyway.

Interviewer: Well, I think I've heard — and this might be one of the field guide writers. They say look at the bird in the field, and make sketches, and then go back and look through the field guides for them.

Harvey Patten: You know, I've never been able to do that. There's a lady at LSU whose name escapes me at the moment. She's a big proponent of that. My brother was kind of a bird artist in his younger days, but I don't have that talent, and for some reason whenever I put a bird down, it always looked like a giraffe or a hippopotamus. So, I gave up. *[Laughs]*

Well, I used to use a tape recorder on occasion when I would go into Honey Island Swamp, which is east of here about 20 miles. I would use a tape recorder if I had a question about something I might have been hearing. Then I would tape it and play it back after I got home.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well Harvey, thanks so much.

Harvey Patten: You're welcome, Jim. Say hello to everybody over there, and give my regards to Julie, and anybody else that I might know who — probably very few people these days.

Interviewer: Well, I will do that, I will sure do that, and I'll be in touch.

Interviewer: Thanks so much.

Harvey Patten: You're welcome.

Interviewer: Bye-bye.

Harvey Patten: Bye-bye.

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