

# Philadelphia Larus

Vol. 28 No. 2



Spring 2001

## Ontario Winter Birding Weekend: March 2-4, 2001

Amherst Island, Algonquin Provincial Park,  
Bracebridge and Brantford

By Martin Selzer

On Friday, March 2, five of us, Bert Filemyr, Jane Henderson, Lynn Jackson, Karl Lukens and myself, left Flourtown, PA at 5:55 A.M. and headed up the Northeast Extension of the PA Turnpike. We crossed into Canada around 11:35 A.M. and headed into Kingston.

While we were checking out the DuPont Hot Ponds before catching the ferry to Amherst Island, Bert shouted, "Get out of the van!" A white morph Gyrfalcon was flying straight at us about 75 feet up in the air. It streamed towards the prison and stooped on a big flock of pigeons. What a way to start the trip! And our amazing birding weekend had just begun.

We caught the 1:30 P.M. ferry to Amherst Island and stopped at the fire station. A young female Snowy Owl was sitting on a clump of dirt near the building. Rough-legged Hawks were out hunting the fields. On our way east towards Owl Woods we saw at least ten more rough-legs, both dark and light morph birds, some quite close.



Snowy Owl © Adrian Binns

At the feeders in the woods on Amherst, we caught up with Kevin Karlson and Adrian and Jane Binns. A couple of black-capped chickadees competed for sunflower seeds in Adrian's hand.

A Saw-whet Owl sat in a nearby cedar tree. Another Saw-whet peeked out of a nest box, and several more perched in cedars on the island.

Bert found a Boreal Owl about nine feet up in a cedar on the edge where the sassafras trees

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## Jim Merrit: Birder of Note(s)

by Jane Henderson



In trying to recall exactly when it was that I first met Jim Merrit, I searched through scribbles in my little notebooks and diaries. All I remembered was that, some years ago, he led an ANS weekend field trip to Maryland. So I pulled out my box of little birding notebooks from under the guest room bed and sat down on the floor to look through them and get the details.

Not finding what I needed right away, I pulled out another box that stores diaries. I did remember that it had been a spring weekend, because I'd seen my first Yellow-throated Warbler on the trip. That note was in my field guide, and it narrowed things down a little. After putting the two notebooks and my field guide together, I found the information I was looking for. On Saturday, May 10, 1986 we left the Academy at 6:00 A.M.. Jim drove one of the vans. I guess a dozen or so of us went. I'd noted the names of only three people besides me.

We'd visited Elliot Island and Pocomoke Swamp. We spent the night at a house owned by the Maryland Audubon Society, near Crisfield. We had all brought sleeping bags, and while we were fussing around arranging them on the floor, Jim fell sound asleep while people stepped over him. I was amazed that he could do that. He says he still goes to bed very early every night. "Don't call me after 7:00," he advised me. And no wonder: according to Bill and Naomi Murphy, who have traveled a lot with Jim over the years, he's up at 3:00 A.M. and ready to go, most days.

On Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> we went to Shad Landing, where I saw that Yellow-throated Warbler. We were back at the Academy at 8:00 P.M. In my diary I noted that I'd had "a wonderful time."

When I phoned Jim to arrange this interview, he said he would like me to visit his home and see his notes. So that's what I did. And what a collection of notes he has! He has 7200 pages of notes in 35 bound volumes. They record every birding trip he has

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## Spring, Summer and Early Fall Programs

**April 19: Alice Doolittle**, Coordinator of the nongame and Endangered Species program for Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, will discuss the status, trends and recovery efforts for the Piping Plover, focusing on the Delaware and Great Lakes areas. Alice has a BS in Biology from Yale and an MS in Wildlife Conservation from the University of Minnesota.

**May 3: Nate Rice**, Collections Manager at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, will present “An Avifaunal Survey of the Acari Mountains in Southern Guyana.” Nate is a native of Wisconsin and graduated from the University of Wisconsin. His Masters degree was from the university of Kansas where he studied antbirds. One of the collecting expeditions during this research is the topic of his talk tonight.

**May 17: Leo Joseph**, Ornithologist at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, will speak on “How DNA helps us to see what we don’t see when we see birds; examples from cuckoos and flycatchers.” Leo is a native of Australia where he obtained his PhD on rainforest birds and acquired a special fondness for parrots. After three years’ post-doc studies in Uruguay he moved to the Academy where he has been doing research for the past four years. Some of the fruits of his labors will be presented tonight.

**June 7: Pete Bacinski**, Director of the Owl Haven Nature Center in Tennent for the New Jersey Audubon Society, will give a lecture on “The Butterflies of new Jersey.” Pete graduated from Pace University and did his Master’s in entomology at Fairleigh Dickinson University and, later, was awarded an MBA in marketing there. A photographer, field trip leader and lecturer for 25 years, Pete is as fascinated by insects as by birds.

**July 5, August 2 and September 6: Informal meetings** at the Academy for information swapping, tale-telling and personal trip arranging.

**September 20: Sam Fried**, co-founder of Flights of Fancy Adventures, Inc., a birding and natural history travel company, and past President of the Hartford, CT Audubon Society, will present “Belize : Little Known Jewel of Central America.” Sam has photographed over 700 species of birds in North America and is a well-known author of articles about birds.

### Web Sites to Check Out:

Web cam for breeding barred owls:  
<http://www.owlcam.com>

New PA Game Commission site which tracks migrating Tundra Swans with transmitters:  
[http://sites.state.pa.us/PA\\_Exec/PGC/swan/index.htm](http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/PGC/swan/index.htm)

### Birding Milestone

DVOC member Art Bergey sent us this note: At 4:00 AM on August 12, 2000, under the guidance and leadership of Mark Stackhouse from Salt Lake City, Utah, a small group of us left the trailhead high up in the Ruby Mountains of northeastern Nevada. We set out to climb a trail of about 2 miles in length with an average grade of 8% from an elevation of 8600 feet, rising to 9400 feet.

Affected by both the elevation and the sharp slope of the trail, at 80 years of age, I could not possibly keep pace with our leader and my companions, all of whom are much younger than I.

At about 6:30 AM, after a grueling hike I reached our objective, where the others already had a scope trained on our target bird, the Himalayan Snowcock, which was feeding in a small green meadow on the distant slope. Through the scope I had an excellent view of the bird. Later, in another small meadow nearby I found four more Snowcocks.

The Snowcock was the last Code 3 bird I needed to see; it was #800 on my ABA Area list.

In a postscript, Art added this note: On February 3, 2001 I observed my ABA Bird #802, a Fieldfare in Frederickton, New Brunswick.



Please submit announcements, pieces to be considered for publication, schedules and other information for *Philadelphia Larus* to:  
Jane Henderson

DVOC Website Address:  
<http://www.acnatsci.org/dvoc>

## Field Trips

### 100 Years of Birding History in Potter's Notes

On March 20, 2001 Howard Boyd, Al Driscoll, Elmer Rowley, Alan Brady, Don Jones, Sandy Sherman and I met at Augie Sexauer's home in the Pine Barrens for the purpose of looking through boxes of Julian Potter's notes. An Eastern Screech Owl observed us from the nesting box in Augie's amazing wooded backyard.

In these boxes were 100 years of records which include field notes, diaries, photos, newspaper clippings, drawings, charts. One large chart records New Jersey Bald Eagle nesting sites from 1960 through 1968. The photos, many of which are framed, depict birds, birders, animals and scenery.

Many of the items we examined were original drawings by Conrad K. Roland. Some were Christmas cards, some informal notes, many cartoons with humorous captions. On some, Roland referred to Potter as "Jewel."

Tucked in the diaries are newspaper clippings which correspond to the date of the diary entry.

Sandy was excited to find documentation of a gathering the night before before the December 16, 1937 DVOG meeting at which Witmer Stone distributed copies of *Bird Studies of Old Cape May*. Those copies are inscribed by Witmer Stone and signed by 12 other men.

For Sandy's complete detective story about tracking down extant copies of *Bird Studies of Old Cape May*, see the upcoming *Cassinia*.

All of us who were present at Augie's house on March 20 felt awed and privileged to be in the presence of such a wealth of birding history.

Until his death, Ed Manners was the custodian of Julian Potter's notes. Since Augie and his wife will soon be moving to a smaller place, the notes will reside at the home of Don Jones.

J.H.

**May 4, 5, 6, Fri-Sun. Maryland: Black Rail or Bust** (Elliott Island in evenings, Pokomoke Swamp days) Cost: TBA  
Info: Colin Campbell

**May 13, Sun. White Clay Creek, DE.** Meet at Hot Shoppes Rest Area on Rte I-95 south of Wilmington, between exits for Rtes 273 & 896 at 6:00 AM. Cerulean and Hooded Warblers, Pileated Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher. Last year, White-winged Crossbills.  
Info: Andy Ednie

**May 12, Sat. Pennypack Creek Park, Phila,** for all-day affair with warblers & search for Bicknell's Thrush in afternoon.  
Info: Frank Windfelder

**May 20, Sun. Hawkin Rd. and Brightview Farm, Burlington Co, NJ.** Target birds: Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers and grassland species at Brightview. Meet at 6 AM at Vincentown Diner, Rtes 206/38  
Info: Don Jones

**May 25,26, Fri-Sat. All night Pelagic** on Miss Barnegat Light to Hudson and Tom's Canyons. 10 PM departure. \$120.  
Info: Alan Brady

**June 2, Sat. Lewes, DE Pelagic** on Skip Jack" to Baltimore & Hudson Canyons. 4 AM to 4 PM. Info: Armas Hill or Andy Ednie (see above)

June 9, Sat. Lewes, DE Pelagic

Aug. 25, Sat. Brielle, NJ Pelagic

Sept. 1, Sat. Brielle, NJ Pelagic

Sept. 2, Sun. Cape May Pelagic

Merrit, Cont'd from Page 1

taken since 1940. The notes are carefully typed on bond paper, and are complete with a list of participants, detailed weather information, a commentary on the location, and of course detailed notes on all the birds and mammals. There are also photos, many taken by Jim, of the people, the places and the birds. I saw pictures of lots of DVOC people, including Alan and Liz Brady, Armas Hill, Harry Franzen, and Bill and Naomi Murphy.

In his book *Birding in the American West* Kevin Zimmer wrote: "One of the most productive exercises that a field birder can engage in is keeping a field journal to chronicle his or her activities." I'm sure that Jim's journals would rate a gold star by Kevin's criteria. I think my notes would rate something close to zero.

Jim's interest in birding began when, as a young boy, he spent many summers at a family vacation cottage in Ontario, Canada. A close friend there "had the bug," and Jim went out with him a number of times. One summer, Jim recalls seeing several Pileated Woodpeckers pounding away on the front porch's cedar posts, and that did it.

Jim went on his first Christmas Count in Nashville in 1940. As he dutifully counted Blue Jays and Cardinals, he naively figured his contribution to science was "something akin to Edison's invention of the electric light bulb."

Jim's first trip to Cape May in September, 1942, was an eventful one. He went by train from Princeton. Early the next morning he was on the beach with his binoculars, and was promptly challenged by a not-too-polite Coast Guardsman. This was the height of the German U-Boat campaign off the east Coast, and the beach was a restricted area. He was detained and queried at the local Coast Guard station. Luckily, Richard Pough, the Audubon warden at Cape May Point, came to his rescue and, in fact, took him birding for the rest of the day. Jim got 16 new birds that day.

Sponsored by a close family friend and neighbor, Charles H. Rogers, the Princeton University Ornithologist, Jim joined DVOC in 1943. He recalls that Robert Cushman Murphy was the guest speaker that night.

Jim served in the Navy in the latter days of World War II, but his only sea trip was aboard an aircraft carrier being towed from Bayonne to Brooklyn. He was in the Navy again during the Korean War, serving most of his time in the Washington bureaucracy. He did have one tour of duty as supply officer of an ammunition ship in the Pacific. He recalls counting albatrosses every day and seeing a flock of tens of thousands of Streaked Shearwaters off Tokyo Bay.

A little later, Jim took Charles Rogers' ornithology course at the University where he met a grad student named Beverly Ridgely. The two became close birding companions. In 1968, they traveled to Panama to visit and bird with Beverly's son Robert, who was stationed near

there, and who had developed a keen interest in birds. Robert was bemoaning the fact that there was no good guide to the birds of Panama, and he already had in mind doing something about that.

Following his discharge from the Navy in 1954, Jim joined General Electric Co. in Schenectady, NY. He became a regional reporting editor for *The Kingbird*, the quarterly publication of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs. Jim also edited regional reports and wrote a covering summary.

When Jim's wife died in 1959, he moved back with his three children to the family home in Princeton and was able to arrange a job transfer to GE in Philadelphia. Jim remarried in 1960 and purchased a home in Turnersville, NJ where he still lives.

Over the years, Jim has maintained close association with the DVOC. He is the only person to have served in all five official club officer categories. For several years in the mid-1970s Jim was instrumental in organizing the DVOC trip aboard the chartered DC-3 to Churchill, Alaska, Guatemala and Texas. He also led two trips to Ontario.

For many years, Jim was the Christmas Count compiler for the Oceanville NJ count, and for several years he edited the new Jersey and Pennsylvania counts for the National Audubon Society. For 25 years he was a regional reporting editor for the new Jersey Audubon Society, a job more ably now held, Jim notes, by Ward Dasey.

Over the course of many years, he has birded in every continent except Australia. Jim doubts that he will make that trip because of the long plane ride. Jim's last big trip was to Antarctica last year. He cited his 1985 to Africa as perhaps the most memorable.

Associations and friendships within the birding community have been a source of great pleasure. He considers these folks "a grand bunch of people."

Before I left Jim's house he showed me his bound copies of *Audubon Field Notes*, from Volume 1, when it separated from *Bird Lore*. He also has bound copies of *American Birds*, as well as complete sets of *Kingbird* and *Birding*.

Ontario, Cont'd from Page 1

meet the cedars. We checked out the pines for Long-eared Owls and found several, which perched for brief moments and then flushed. We continued around the island and were amazed at the number of Rough-legged Hawks. We also had two more Snowy Owls.



Boreal Owl © Adrian Binns

We caught the 5 P.M. ferry off the island and made for the reported Northern Hawk Owl on Joyceville Road. We got there just in time to see it come out of the woods, perch on power lines, chase an American Kestrel away and catch a mouse. We had dinner with Kevin, Adrian and Jane in Kingston, and they told us that they had seen 15 Short-eared Owls hunting at dusk while we were watching the Hawk Owl. Not a bad winter's day of birding! We spent the night in Kingston.



Northern Hawk-owl © Adrian Binns

The next morning we met for breakfast at 7 A.M and headed for the east gate of Algonquin Provincial Park. A Northern Shrike perched in perfect light on the entrance ramp to Route 401. On the way, at a neighborhood feeder in Whitney, we found several Evening Grosbeaks.

At the east gate of the park, we purchased a day use pass and began to bird our way west. We had small flocks of White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins along the road. Around KM 48, I spotted a female Pine Grosbeak in the birches. We drove in as far as we could on Opeonogo Road and then walked around in hopes of Boreal Chickadee. No luck on this one.

We had lunch at the cafeteria in the visitor center and checked out the feeders. Besides a beautiful view and a few Red-breasted Nuthatches, there was not much happening. We drove a short way farther west, to the Spruce Bog Boardwalk Trail. At the trailhead we found two very friendly Gray Jays which fed from our hands. Picky eaters,

they preferred Lynn's Fresh Fields organic peanuts to Bert' Brand-X birdseed.

We walked the trail, and I spotted a male Spruce Grouse 20 yards in. We were able to get to within a few feet of it. We went on to Mew Lake Campground in hopes of a Three-toed Woodpecker, but had to settle for a nice walk. The campground was very busy with hikers, skiers and campers taking advantage of the tent sites and yurts.

From there we went straight to the Muskoka Beach Sewage Treatment plant to look for the Great Gray Owl that Adrian and the others had seen there. We followed the trio's footprints and tripod marks in the knee-deep snow and headed off into the trees. About 20 feet in, 15 feet up and 20-30 yards from where we entered the trees was a Great Grey Owl sitting with a white mouse (courtesy of Adrian) in its talons. We closed in, took pictures, and then walked away from one of the most sought after birds in North America.

We headed straight to another Great Grey at the intersection of Butter and Egg and Falkenburg Roads. Right at the intersection, delicately balanced on a birch limb was GGOW #2. We talked with a Canadian birder there who told us of another just down the road. He said that he had seen five here the day before. I put the scope on the bird at the corner, zoomed up to 50 power and the bird filled the field of view. GGOW #3 was in a tree at the far end of the field.

We drove up the road to find the Northern Hawk Owl and headed back to town to get gas. Since we still had some daylight, we headed to Cedar Lane, knowing that up to four Great Greys were being seen there. We quickly found four more GGOWs bringing our day total to 7.

I had seen my first GGOW in 1989 at Whitefish Point, MI. I had since seen them in Idaho in 1990 (a bird on a nest with two nestlings), Manitoba in 1995 and Washington State in 1997. In about 2 hours and 15 minutes I had more than doubled the number of individual GGOWs I had seen. The last bird was sitting on a fence post by the side of the road not more than 10 feet from us. A resident of the area told us that at least 15 Great Greys had been seen in the Bracebridge area. A sad note: two had been found dead of starvation and two more had been taken to a wildlife rehabilitation station. We spent the night in Bracebridge.



Great Gray Owl © Adrian Binns

# DVOC WORLD SERIES TEAM NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT!

Monies raised by DVOC for the World Series are the primary source of the club's conservation funds. The bulk of this year's proceeds will go to the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences to purchase a new cabinet and specimen tray combination. Additional funds will support bird restoration projects.

DVOC's Lagerhead Shrikes team, made up of Paul Guris, Mike Fritz, Adrian Binns and Bill Stocku, with the logistical support of Anita Guris, are experts at the game of "hit and run" and highly skilled in the arts of scouting, planning, executing and dealing with the unexpected. Their expertise has brought them victory the last two years.

They do their part. Now it's YOUR turn! To make our team's efforts the most successful ever, we need EVERYONE'S support in the form of pledges and contributions from DVOC members and friends. Please get involved by using this form to make a pledge or a direct contribution.

.....

## YES! I WANT TO SUPPORT THE DVOC TEAM IN THE 2001 WORLD SERIES OF BIRDING!

Here's my pledge per species sighted:

\$1.00 \_\_\_\_\_ 50c \_\_\_\_\_ 25c \_\_\_\_\_ 10c \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Or, I would like to contribute this amount to the DVOC Team's efforts: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Street Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_ Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Return this tear-off, with your pledge or contribution, to Jan and Ken Gordon,  
.....

Because of the prediction for blizzard conditions at home, we left Bracebridge at 5:15 A.M. in a light snowfall, and headed straight south to Toronto on Route 11. Because we were making good time, we decided to make a short side trip to Brantford to look for Gray Partridge at the airport there. In the farm fields outside the airport, we found a few Horned Larks. The partridges had been reported under the picnic tables near the terminal building. When we didn't see anything from the car, I suggested that Bert get out and check around the corner. "After all," I said, "It would be pretty silly to have come this far and miss them because we didn't get out of the van." As soon as he got near the fence, two Gray Partridges flushed and headed back towards the hangar area. We all got to see their rusty tails, and noted that at least one was a male with a dark belly patch and rusty cheek.

With this last success under our belts, we split for home, driving straight through except for quick stops for gas and food. We hit heavy snow in Binghamton, NY and had it with us for the rest of the ride home. The ride on the north end of the Northeast extension was pretty ugly with lots of snow and poor driving conditions. The snow finally lightened up below Allentown and became snow mixed with rain. We got home around 5:00 P.M., having clocked 1462 miles, door to door. Starting with a white Gyrfalcon and ending with Gray Partridges, the entire trip was one we'll never forget. And, in spite of the dire predictions, our area never experienced the blizzard.

Straight north from here on I-81, Amherst Island is no farther than Newburyport, Massachusetts. Any time there is an invasion of owls up there, a weekend trip from here is eminently doable, and absolutely matchless.



Saw-whet Owl © Adrian Binns