

# Bird Calls



Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

October 2009 [www.ensbc.org](http://www.ensbc.org)

## THE PHOEBE I KNEW

By Joel Greenberg

I owe my friendship with Phoebe in part to a Snowy Owl.

In the winter of 1976, several St Louis birders drove to Chicago to look for that owl. Phoebe Snetsinger was the leader of that group. That fall, I started graduate school in St Louis. Some friends told me about the St Louis folks and encouraged me to contact Phoebe.

The first time we met was on a Webster Grove Nature Study Society field trip. Phoebe and I hit it off well and were soon on our way to becoming close friends.



*Black-footed Albatross by Tim Wallace.*

Phoebe had a wide range of interests. One night, we went to the Wash U observatory to observe some celestial phenomenon. We came back to my apartment to talk and laugh. I told her I had Eurasian tree sparrows in the neighborhood and some years later, I noticed a man with binoculars walking around the building. He said he had met Phoebe

on a pelagic off Maine. She gave him my address as a good place to see this St. Louis-area specialty.

I recall when Phoebe was diagnosed with cancer and given a year to live.

We talked by phone the summer of 1981 about our respective preparations—me for the Illinois Bar Exam, and she for a trip to Australia. I told her that it was impossible for me to think beyond the exam—the enormosity of the test and its consequences imposed a tiny horizon on the future. Referring to her profound health challenges, she said she too was in a situation where it was impossible to see an expansive future. My perspective on the obstacle confronting me changed dramatically in the wake of her words.

I was one of the first people Phoebe called upon her return from the infamous New Guinea trip in 1986, where she had been raped. She enthused about seeing the Kagu on New Caledonia, but when she and her guide David Bishop arrived in West New Britain, her tale became darker. Due to an errant radio report, local residents believed that the two of them were murderers. One time, they were encircled by hostile locals, and only David's quick thinking and

continued on pg 2

## A CONVERSATION WITH OLIVIA GENTILE

By Eleonora di Liscia

ENSBC is honored to present Olivia Gentile as our Ruth Milgrom Speaker on October 27, 2009. Olivia wrote the excellent biography, *Life List*, about Phoebe Snetsinger, the first birder to attain 8,000 species.



Prairie Warbler by Nancy Halliday

**Bird Calls:** What attracted you to Phoebe's story?

**Olivia:** I was really interested in writing about a birdwatcher because of the birdwatcher that I dated. He was a wonderful man who turned out to suffer from depression. What was very moving is that birding was the only thing that enabled him to get out of bed on a regular basis. Seeing the powerful connection he had to the natural world helped me to understand. After we broke up, I wanted to explore this connection in greater depth, and I happened to hear about Phoebe as I was poking around for a birdwatcher to write about.

**BC:** What was the hardest part about researching the book?

**Olivia:** I think it was challenging to earn the family's trust. The Snetsingers are very smart, dignified and private people. We're so inundated with people willing to air their dirty laundry, and the Snetsingers are the opposite. They had mixed feelings about the choices Phoebe made, and they were understandably reluctant to discuss these choices with me. Over time, they gave me access to her private papers, which was incredibly generous and enabled me to get inside her head.

**BC:** How did the family feel about the book?

**Olivia:** I think they are very happy with the finished product. The process was a little trying for them because I kept going back for interview after interview. Dave might think I focused too much on the conflicts in their marriage. I understand where he's coming from. They did have very good early years together, and I don't dwell on them for more than a chapter or two, but it was a choice I had to make as a biographer.

continued on pg 3

## THE PHOEBE I KNEW CONTINUED FROM COVER

tongue enabled them to escape harm. A little later they encountered another angry crowd along the road as they drove towards town. Listening to this, I was amazed: "My god, Phoebe, that is awful." Her reply: "That's nothing, wait until New Guinea."

The two birders caught an early flight and headed towards Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Over the next two days, they birded several areas near the city, finishing at the sewage ponds. As they drove out, they found a log blocking the road. Five men with machetes approached the car, and one smashed the rear window with a rock. Phoebe and David were forced into the back seat, among the pieces of glass. As the men drove off, Phoebe told me that what went through her mind during that terrifying ride was that whatever happened, she had seen the Kagu. She was so thankful that she had sent post cards to family attesting to that fact.

As she proceeded to tell what happened, I was speechless, almost in tears. I so expected that something would intervene to save her

from the horrible violence that seemed imminent. Here she was calmly telling me the story, but in fact there was no intervention. I felt angry and maybe even ashamed to be of the same gender as those who do such things. I couldn't read her mind, of course, and who knows what of the rape lingered with her, but in telling her story, she manifested the mental and emotional strength that enabled her to complete her mission of seeing 8,000 birds.

Phoebe called me in August 1996, promising that she would let me know if any good birds turned up in the St. Louis area. A couple of days later, true to her word, she phoned about some Wood Storks on the Illinois side of the river. My friend, Renee Baade and I left early the next morning, and met Phoebe, who showed us the birds. It was a real joy for me.

And that would be the last time I saw Phoebe, for she died three years later on the west coast of Madagascar when the driver of her van fell asleep at the wheel.

Olivia's book makes it clear that to do

what Phoebe accomplished takes an incredible single mindedness and devotion that few of us could muster. Phoebe told me of an excursion to Japan she took with two leaders and maybe three birders. They were together constantly; some nights they all slept in the same room. Yet months later when one of the leaders confessed to her that he was not getting along with the other and almost left, she was amazed she had not even noticed. If she had worried about personalities, food, lodging, pain, and other "trivialities" of life, she would have soon been distracted from the goal of seeing as many birds as possible.

I was pleased that when I read Life List, I found it a largely balanced and nuanced treatment of my beloved friend. Olivia succeeds in providing different perspectives on Phoebe's complicated life. But if all you know of Phoebe is what you read here, it seems your opinion is likely to be negative; I can read the same words and feel even closer to this remarkable woman.

## MEMBERS LOOK BACK

The stories that could be related are almost infinite, but one of my "fun" memories was from the first meeting of the year, "Members Night," around seven to ten years ago. People would show up with slide tray in hand and present some of their favorite or most recent slides, along with some level of discussion, mostly serious but sometimes very funny. On this particular night, Joel Greenberg got up and put his tray in the projector and started showing whatever he had brought that night. The first slide was upside down, but he presented it as-is and then went on to the next one, which was also upside down. Most people would have pulled the tray, let the next person present their stuff and then come back up with their tray correctly positioned, but not our Joel. He just continued plowing through his whole tray, every picture upside down, and that was a fun, memorable evening for me. I like good humor and Joel never lacks in that regard!—**Robert Johnson**

For a Christmas Count a group of us piled into Barbara Nobles' vehicle and added our birding gear to hers. At our first stop we collected our binoculars and started searching. Soon we noticed Gertrude Ludwig fussing and fuming trying to adjust her binoculars. Finally, "I can't seem to see anything with these binoculars" she said. "Let me see those" says Barbara. She looked. "Oh." She then proceeded to throw her head back and take an imaginary swig from the binocular shaped liquor bottle!—**Ruth Lempert**

## NEWS OF THE FLOCK

**WELCOME TO NEW MEMBER:**

*Gwen Gregory of Chicago.*

*Bird Calls is saddened to note the passing of life member, Joseph Goodman.*

## EDITOR'S NOTES

**BIRD CALLS NEEDS YOUR HELP!**

In honor of ENSBC's 90th anniversary, we would like to hear some of your remembrances. If you have a good story to tell or something interesting that you recall from ENSBC's past, please send it to Bird Calls at [diliscialaw@comcast.net](mailto:diliscialaw@comcast.net).

**REMEMBERING RALPH**

In honor of Ralph Herbst, the Bird Club will be selling items from his bird book and bird art collections at program night meetings. Half of the money will go to support the Club. The other half will go to the Herbst family. New items will be available at each program night until all are sold. This is a chance to get great books at great deals.

**NO MORE "IN CASE YOU MISSED IT"**

Due to space considerations, Bird Calls will not be continuing the In Case You Missed It series of reporting on club program nights. You'll just have to come in person!

## OLIVIA GENTILE CONTINUED FROM COVER

**BC:** What did you admire most about Phoebe?

**Olivia:** I admired the way she was so passionate, and the way she could bring her energy and her focus to the field and have these wonderful days. We should all have such wonderful days. I also admired her intelligence, her scholarly approach to birding, the way she mentored novices and the way she was so ethical. And I admire her toughness. I took a couple bird tours, and I was thirty years younger, and there were insects and I got dysentery, something Phoebe would get without even thinking about it.

**BC:** What did you find not so admirable about Phoebe?

**Olivia:** The way she got caught up in the

competition to get to 8,000, so much that she started to lose her joy in the field. It was sad for me to see. She had learned to seize the day because she had cancer, but then she fell back into the same trap we all fall into, trying to achieve success.

I do feel like Phoebe was such an attentive and thoughtful mother when her children were young that I don't judge her for her decisions when her children were grown, such as missing Penny's wedding. But she still had a husband. It wasn't fair that she wouldn't let him leave her, or that she broke her promise to him to slow down. She did still have an obligation to be there for her husband or else to let him go. She kind of kept him waiting for her all those years.

**BC:** Do you find readers take sides on Phoebe?

**Olivia:** Phoebe is very provocative. She inspires strong feelings in people. Feelings of love and admiration in some, and feelings of anger and indignation in others. I have some ambivalence toward her, and it's made my job as a biographer interesting. I didn't want to write about Mother Theresa. What I find most rewarding is that Phoebe could really surprise me. Sometimes toward the end, it seemed that all she cared about was birds, but then she'd do something really loving like care for a friend with cancer, attend to a friend whose husband had just died or take a novice birder under her wing.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES: THE 1930s *By Eleonora di Liscia*

The 1930's Evanston Bird Club weathered the Great Depression while continuing to actively promote an interest in birds. The Club generally sponsored an annual spring program night, conducted an annual meeting for business and continued a series of spring bird walks to the Glenview Forest Preserve.

The effects of the Depression crept into the March 10, 1932 membership renewal letter: "In sending out our notices for annual dues, we realize that we are asking for your co-operation in a lean year. Every expenditure must be carefully considered by most of us. All we ask is that you do not lay aside your Bird Club dues hastily or as of no moment."

More critically, the Club's annual renewal letter went out a month late in 1933, because: "We have had a bank moratorium, and our Bird Club funds are still unavailable—even for stamps. No doubt many of you appreciate the experience."

The 1930's Club actively promoted birds in many ways. In response to club pressure, Liggett Drug Stores, Inc. wrote on March 25, 1931 that it had removed the Meadowbrook Bird Game from sale. The game apparently encouraged children to shoot toy guns at local songbirds. The Club wrote that the game was "pernicious in its psychological effects on the minds of children."

On March 1, 1932, Club President Mrs. Frederick Pattee wrote Washington that the Club had gone on record "favoring most heartily" the proposal to acquire and establish the Everglades National Park.

On May 2, 1939, the Club wrote to protest the killing of 2,000 Juncos (variously referred to as snowbirds and American finches) to make an aspic salad for the King and Queen of England at a dinner in Quebec.

The Club greatly enhanced the Evanston Public Library's ornithology section though yearly donations of \$15 or \$20.

While today we worry about communications towers, technological threats are nothing new. In a March 26, 1931 news article, the Club urged the public to take an interest in the "hazardous existence" of birds. According to Mrs. Frederick H. Pattee, "the powerful lights of motor cars and airplanes and the tremendously powerful beacon lights for planes, such as the Lindbergh light, are adding immensely to the toll of bird life that lighthouses have always taken."

The 1930's Club actively conducted community outreach. The Club loaned its collection of stereopticon slides to groups so often that the slides needed repair. Club members also reached out to schools and the boy scouts.

In 1938, the Club invited members to participate in the first club Christmas Bird Count: a "Christmas Census Walk" on Tuesday, December 27, 1938 at 10 a.m. at the west end of Central Street where it terminates at Ridge.

On May 16, 1939, the Club judged essays from The Berry Schools of Atlanta, Georgia. "In judging the awards we are mindful that the person who seems to more easily express his thoughts is not necessarily the best conservationist. We considered them from the point of handling of the subject chosen by the individual," wrote Ms. Schaub. The winning essay was "Value of Birds" by S.L. Mullis.

In 1939, Mrs. Frederick (Bertha Trace) Pattee stepped down as President after serving 20 years since founding the club, a term not remotely equaled by any future president. Mrs. Pattee worked tirelessly to promote the interest of birds. She wrote articles for the Audubon Bulletin, gave countless talks at area schools, championed the feeding and care of birds in the newspapers, as well as sending the annual plea to remember our feathered friends by maintaining a membership in the bird club.

And I, for one, shall miss her.



*The Meadowbrook bird game encouraged children to shoot toy guns at local songbirds.  
Photo by Tim Wallace.*

**FIELD TRIPS**

**October 17, 2009 – Saturday**

**Illinois Beach State Park, Camp Logan.** Reservations with the leader required. A great spot for hawkwatching is Sailing Beach. Meet at 10:00 a.m. at the Sailing Beach entrance shelter off Camp Logan (17th Street in Zion). If hawkwatching is slow the leader will decide to bird elsewhere. Leader: David B. Johnson, djohnsoda@comcast.net, 847-459-3989.

**October 24, 2009 - Saturday**

**The Grove, Glenview.** Expect later warblers and other passerines. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at The Grove: east side of Milwaukee Ave., just south of Lake Ave in the second parking lot that leads to the Interpretative Center - Leader: Ari Rice.

**November 14, 2009 – Saturday**

**Northwest Indiana (Miller Beach, Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area, and other sites).** Join this all-day trip to see a variety of fall migrants. Trip ends at JPFWA at duck at the elevated viewing platform to see thousand of sandhill cranes. Participants can meet at the home of Joel Greenberg at 6:30 a.m. or in Miller, IN at 7:30 a.m. Contact the leader for more details. Leader: Joel Greenberg, ckerchmar@earthlink.net, 630-725-9416.

**November 22, 2009 – Sunday**

**40th Annual Jeff Sanders' Fall Specialty Trip!** North shore lakefront – Northwestern, Gillson Park, Maple Park, Tower Road Park, Park Ave, Rose Beach in Highland Park, and other areas as time permits. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at Northwestern University beach. Go east on Lincoln St. from Sheridan Rd., turn south past the giant fitness center, then turn east (left) and go almost to the end. Bring scopes and dress for cold lake wind. Leader: Jeff Sanders.

**PROGRAM NIGHTS**

All programs are at: Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd. For directions to programs on meeting nights, call the Ecology Center, 847-448-8256.

**October 27**

**“Life List”:** Our Ruth Milgram speaker for this year is Olivia Gentile whose recent book “Life List” is a wonderfully nuanced portrait of the great Phoebe Snetsinger, the first person in the world to see 8,000 birds. Phoebe was certainly single-minded in her avian quest, but only someone with incredible mental strength could have accomplished what she did. Olivia had access to Phoebe’s personal papers and interviewed scores of people in writing this highly acclaimed book about an extraordinary person, whom many of us in this region had the privilege of knowing. There will be copies of “Life List” for sale which Olivia will be happy to sign.

**November 24**

**“The Early Bird Project: Unraveling the Avian Tree of Life”:** Dr. Shannon Hackett, Associate Curator of Birds at the Field Museum, will talk about the exciting new results of the five-year National Science Foundation “Tree of Life” project. She and her colleagues gathered the largest DNA sequence data set of its kind which they used to investigate the evolutionary relationships of all orders and families of birds. Come hear how the tree of birds has been shaken.

**TWO CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORIES** BY BRIAN HERRIOTT

While a great deal of bird habitat is lost every day and these stories are worthy of notice, I take great pleasure in writing about two newly created natural areas on Chicago’s north side. I hope you can find time in your busy day to talk a stroll in one or both of these new parks!

First, the former Fort Sheridan in Lake County is home to a unique, undeveloped stretch of lakefront dune habitat and high-quality ravine. The newly created Openlands Lakeshore Preserve in Highland Park includes six of these ecologically rich ravines, but the Bartlett Ravine is the only one which you can walk into. The walls on either side of a road built down the middle of the ravine can reach up to 70 feet. During migration, the thick forest surrounding the ravine is sure to attract numerous songbirds, while the beach should attract shorebirds and sparrows.

The village initially slated this land for development, but U.S Rep. Mark Kirk (R-III) and the Openlands organization were able to

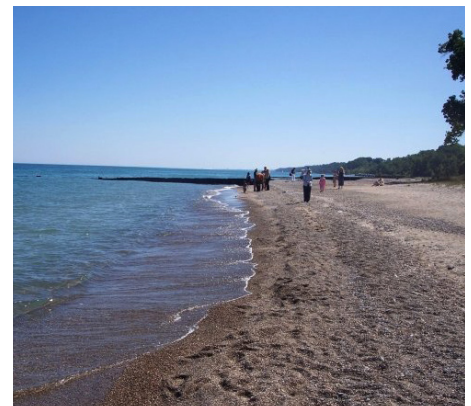
insure that this piece of valuable property remained in its natural state. Currently, restoration continues along with plans for bluff top trails and educational programs.

If you plan on going or would like to learn more about this wonderful location, please visit [www.openlands.org](http://www.openlands.org).

The second new natural area is a prairie and wetland habitat, called the Dunning-Read Natural Restoration Area, and runs north of Irving Park Road and west of Oak Park Avenue. Located within the Chicago Read Mental Health Center campus, this 19 acre site was saved from development and is being rehabilitated by volunteers and neighborhood organizations. With nearly five acres of total wetlands on the site and a considerable amount of grassland habitat, this will surely offer an important stopover site for migrating birds. This site was formerly slated to house a Home Depot, strip malls and 250 homes. Friends of the Parks, along with neighborhood opposition, defeated the plan, and today this area is now

protected by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Both these new parks offer excellent examples of what volunteers, neighborhood organizations, and even politicians can do to save urban land from being developed and lost forever. Be sure to pay them both a visit come springtime.



Openlands Lakeshore Preserve  
Photo by Marilyn Ferdinand