

THE ABA'S INSTITUTE FOR FIELD ORNITHOLOGY A Brief History



In the 1980s, IFO workshops were based out of the University of Maine at Machias. In this scene from an early IFO workshop, invertebrate specialist Dr. Gayle Kraus (third from left) is flanked by workshop instructor Wayne Petersen (left) and IFO program progenitor Charles Duncan (right). Participants in this workshop received in-depth training in shorebird feeding ecology. *Machias, Maine; August 1988.* © Betty Petersen.

Wayne R. Petersen

P. O. Box 686
Hanson, Massachusetts 02341
wpetersen@massaudubon.org

In early December 1983 I received a phone call from Dr. Charles D. Duncan, who was at the time teaching chemistry and environmental studies at the University of Maine at Machias. He explained that the president of the university was looking for creative ways to utilize the campus facilities during the non-academic season, particularly if the activities could capitalize on the university's unique and scenic location in "Downcast" Maine. Building upon his own passion for field ornithology, and in response to

the university president's aspirations, Charles had the idea to develop an ornithological training program that would "expand upon, rather than duplicate, the work of existing organizations." Central to his thinking was the premise that amateur birders are capable of making substantial contributions to serious ornithological endeavors. He asked what I thought of the concept and inquired if I would be interested in teaching a workshop to help launch the program. Since the plan was compelling, I immediately agreed. Given Charles's enthusiasm and the reality that few ornithological field-training opportunities for amateur birders were readily available at the time, it was the perfect time for the Institute for

Field Ornithology (IFO) program to be born.

With input and support from ornithological colleagues, Charles established goals for the IFO that remain essentially unchanged today. The program would endeavor to:

- hold workshops and courses for improving field skills and ornithological knowledge
- make known ways in which birders might contribute to the scientific or aesthetic appreciation of birds in their natural habitats
- encourage cooperation between amateur and professional ornithologists
- contribute to the conservation of wild birds
- provide a convenient location for all to work, to study, and to discuss birds

Once the organizational structure for the IFO was finalized, Charles adopted a logo that would be used for marketing efforts. He chose the Razorbill, a species that would become emblematic of the program and geographically appropriate for the early workshops held in eastern Maine. Working from a photograph taken by Paul Donahue, Jane Hinson created the artwork for the Razorbill that graces IFO publicity to this day. In the summer of 1984 Greg Budney offered a workshop on bird song recording, and I taught a course on shorebirds. The two offerings together launched what has become a 23-year legacy of providing high-quality field ornithology workshops for amateur birders.

Following a 17-year tenure, Charles Duncan left the University of Maine at Machias to take on a bird conservation initiative with The Nature Conservancy. With no one at the university to maintain the IFO, the American Birding Association (ABA), working in concert with the University of Maine at Machias, had an opportunity to acquire the program. The timing was perfect since the ABA was actively seeking a creative way to develop education possibilities for adult birders. Beginning in 2000, the ABA assumed full responsibility for the IFO, a program it has successfully nurtured ever since.

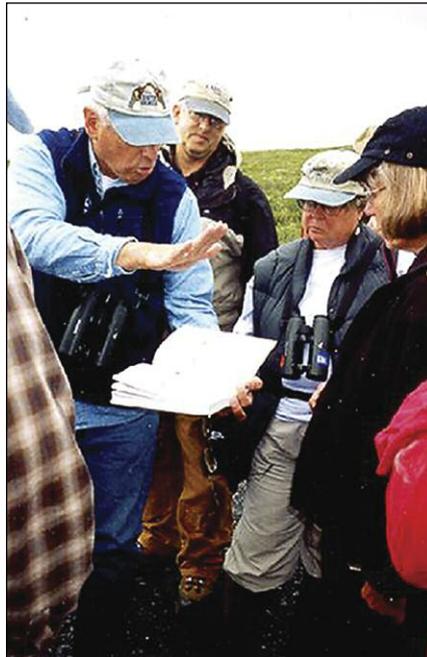
In the beginning, IFO workshops were typically one

week in length, although through the years certain course offerings and differing course venues have from time to time necessitated minor variations in this format. More variable than course length has been the geographical location of the workshops. Although the early IFO courses were traditionally based at the University of Maine at Machias, as the program expanded and the course offerings became more varied, workshop locations began to range from coast to coast, as well as in Canada and Latin America. In my own workshops, for example, *East Coast Shorebirds* has been variously held in Maine, New Brunswick, and Massachusetts, while the *Arctic Breeding Bird Ecology* course has been conducted in Alaska. Throughout the history of the IFO, course venues have also varied widely. In some cases workshop participants have stayed in university facilities and used university food services. In other cases motels, hotels, rental apartments, private tourist lodges, eco-lodges, and scientific research

stations have been used. Depending upon the workshop, the location, and the preferences of participants, practically every combination of housing and meal options imaginable has been offered at one IFO workshop or another. A notable feature of many workshops through the years has been that they are located in settings where participants can readily spend their off-hours birding in interesting locations, without requiring transportation to get there. More than once, workshop participants have shown up before class with an astonishing list of interesting sightings made prior to breakfast!

As indicated by the founding philosophy, education is fundamental to the IFO program. To optimize this emphasis on education, most workshops are limited to 10–18 participants, depending upon the number of instructors and the workshop venue. The cost of workshops also varies, contingent upon the work-

shop location and what is included in the cost. Regardless of these variables, there is always an emphasis on helping workshop attendees improve their field skills and increase their ornithological knowledge—goals ultimately intended to enable them to more effectively engage in activities that will benefit future bird conservation efforts. It has never been a goal of IFO workshops to merely identify and record



IFO instructor Wayne Petersen discusses the biology of the nearly twenty species of shorebirds that breed on the tundra of Alaska's Seward Peninsula. *Coffee Dome, Alaska; June 2003.* © Paul J. Baicich.



Although most American birders have not made the acquaintance of the species, the **Bristle-thighed Curlew** is endemic as a breeder to the ABA Area. Participants in the *Arctic Breeding Bird Ecology* IFO workshop obtain direct field experience with the species on its tundra nesting grounds. *Nome, Alaska; June 2005.* © David K. Weaver.

as many bird species as possible within the time allotted for the courses. IFO instructors try to remain focused on their workshop topics, while the day-to-day organization of most IFO workshops strives to provide a healthy blend of indoor learning activities, along with extensive time spent in the field reinforcing information presented in the classroom. The preference by attendees for a topical focus has been reflected in many IFO course evaluations through the years. Despite the thematic approach of IFO workshops, attendees seem to universally share the passion that accompanies seeing a previously unfamiliar species or adding a new bird species to their life lists, and IFO attendees have recorded an astounding diversity of bird species through the 23-year history of the IFO program.

The background and level of expertise of IFO attendees varies considerably. In my workshops participants have ranged from people practically brand new to birding, to widely traveled and highly experienced veterans. Likewise, the age of workshop attendees has ranged from early teens (accompanied by a parent) to birding seniors well into their 80s. Some participants live in areas close to where the workshops are offered, while others come

from all over the country, as well as from Canada, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. Attendees have included everyone from retired physicians, university professors, and businesspeople to housewives, teachers, and military personnel. Occasionally there have been students of various ages attending workshops, including at least one student who, when it was possible to receive college credit for IFO courses, simply took a workshop to get two college credits to receive a degree! Some IFO alumni have taken more than one workshop, and others have repeated the same workshop more than once. Anyone who enjoys studying birds is well suited for an IFO workshop. Even seasoned experts are quick to admit that they acquire a lot of valuable information and useful experience as a result of their IFO participation. Most participants are quick to agree that, besides being educational, IFO workshops are also lots of fun.

IFO course offerings have been nearly as wide-ranging as the workshop locations. Some courses have emphasized the study of specific groups of birds, such as seabirds, hawks, shorebirds, owls, hummingbirds, flycatchers, wood-warblers, and sparrows. Others, such as



The Institute for Field Ornithology, now under the auspices of the ABA, continues to flourish. In this early-summer scene from Colorado, participants in the *Tundra to Prairie* IFO workshop learn about emerging paradigms in avian community ecology. Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado; 12 June 2005. © Bill Schmoker.



A major objective of IFO workshops is to go beyond mere bird identification, and ask what birds actually *do*. In their studies of the **Clark's Nutcracker**, participants in the *Tundra to Prairie* IFO workshop delve into such matters as thermoregulation, irruptive dispersal, and food caching. Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado; 12 June 2005. © Bill Schmoker.

Tropical Bird Ecology, Arctic Breeding Bird Ecology, Ornithology for Birders, Birding by Ear, Birdsong Recording, Field Sketching and Illustration, Bird Migration, and Wetlands and Waterfowl, have taken a more thematic approach. A few have even taken a geographical bent, for instance *Subtropical Birds of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Caribbean Seabirds, Colorado: Tundra to Prairie, Pacific Northwest Seabirds*, and *Gulf Stream Pelagic and Coastal Birds*. Regardless of the workshop approach, most IFO graduates leave the program with enhanced field skills and increased knowledge.

One of the most important results of the IFO experience is that many alumni now confidently are participating in avian research and conservation activities like the International Shorebird Survey (ISS), the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), and the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program. Others have become involved with systematic monitoring efforts of bird groups like seabirds, marsh birds, migrating raptors, owls, and grassland birds. Some graduates volunteer their time to breeding bird atlas projects, bird banding stations, organized sea watching efforts, and outreach programs at National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, and Important Bird Areas (IBAs).

The opportunities available for the productive application of birding skills acquired at IFO workshops are many and varied, and the extent of involvement of IFO alumni in both past and future ornithological endeavors is a tribute to the seminal wisdom of Charles Duncan, along with all who have carried forward the IFO tradition during the 23 years that followed.