

A *Birding* Interviewwith **John Fitzpatrick**

A birder since kindergarten in Minnesota, John Fitzpatrick has been exploring ways to apply science to real-world conservation issues throughout his career. He is Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at Cornell University, having previously directed Archbold Biological Station in Florida and served as Curator of Birds at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. He has led many expeditions to remote parts of South America, published numerous papers on neotropical birds and Florida Scrub-Jays, and received the American Ornithologists' Union's highest honor, the Brewster Medal. Fitzpatrick was co-leader of the Lab's headline-making Ivory-billed Woodpecker search in 2004–2005.

In this enlightening interview, Fitzpatrick shares the latest news at the Ornithology Lab, reveals the secret for winning the World Series of Birding, and explains how birds can save the world.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How can birds save the world?

John Fitzpatrick: Birds are the most accessible windows we have into nature. The world over, and across all cultures, birds invite us to admire them. They are conspicuous, colorful, and mostly diurnal, so they're easy to watch. They are richly variable in size, structure, and behavior. They communicate with myriad voices, including some songs of enchanting beauty. They can fly, which long has been the envy of us earthbound humans. They migrate at global scales and in immense numbers. Their semiannual comings-and-goings tuned with the seasons have inspired poetry and song since the Stone Age. Birds teach us to love green spaces and the countryside.

I am convinced that humans have an innate de-

sire to live side-by-side with natural systems and wild creatures. I also know that birds help us to communicate and rekindle that desire among even the most cynical and closed-minded in society. It takes work and dedication on the part of communicators and educators to overcome the powers of human greed and self-absorption, but engaging people with birds has enormous power to shift attitudes about what we humans are doing to the planet. Birds literally have the power to change how human society treats the natural world, and to increase our collective commitment to save it.

Birding: With so many known threatened and endangered bird species and habitats, why put so much effort into searching for a few elusive Ivory-billed Woodpeckers?

JF: This bird is a genuine icon. It is a symbol of the great pine and bottomland forests of southeastern North America, and of America's ruthless and exhaustive exploitation of these globally significant forests right through the 20th century. Tragically, great tracts of bottomland hardwood forest continued to be clear-cut even as credible reports continued to suggest that remnant Ivory-billed Woodpeckers might have persisted through the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Yet, until 2004, *no comprehensive effort was ever undertaken to search systematically for remnant breeding pairs of this spectacular bird.* Quite frankly and simply, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker deserves better than this.

I regard the timeless value that could be gained by locating one or more remnant breeding pairs of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers to be priceless. Certainly, by comparison with other high-profile scientific research efforts, the amount of money expended in searching for breeding Ivory-bills is puny. If we fail to find further evidence of the species, the effort will have been well worth the cost. In my view, we have more to lose by *not* searching for this bird than by searching comprehensively for it.

The bigger story is about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker's habitat and the attention it is now receiving. The broad-scale search currently under way for the woodpecker has focused attention not just on the bird, but also on the potentially improving outlook for the great Southern forests. It is our job to use the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in every way we can to teach us what is required to restore extensive tracts of genuine old-growth Southern forest. If we find breeding woodpeckers themselves, they can teach us directly. If we fail, we can still use what we know of the species to deduce old-growth management strategies and to advertise the importance of these strategies for an almost-lost American heritage. The woodpecker can continue teaching us, as long as we are willing to listen.

Birding: What have you learned about the nature of science, people, and politics during the Lab's high-profile search for the Ivory-bill?

JF: I continue to regard the search (those components we can control, at least) as a scientifically rigorous effort to accumulate and evaluate evidence that one or more breeding pairs of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers still exist. The sightings and video of 2004 and 2005 persuaded me, and many others, that at least one male was alive in Arkansas during that period. That evidence remains insufficient to persuade some people, and I understand that. I'm accustomed to debates about evidence, and am quite at peace with the process. As a scientist, I have responsibilities to honestly examine alternative viewpoints about the evidence, to entertain the possibility that my view is wrong, and to make my analyses publicly available for scrutiny. At the same time, I feel no personal compulsion to convince others that their views are wrong, nor to defend myself against people who wrong-

ly question my integrity.

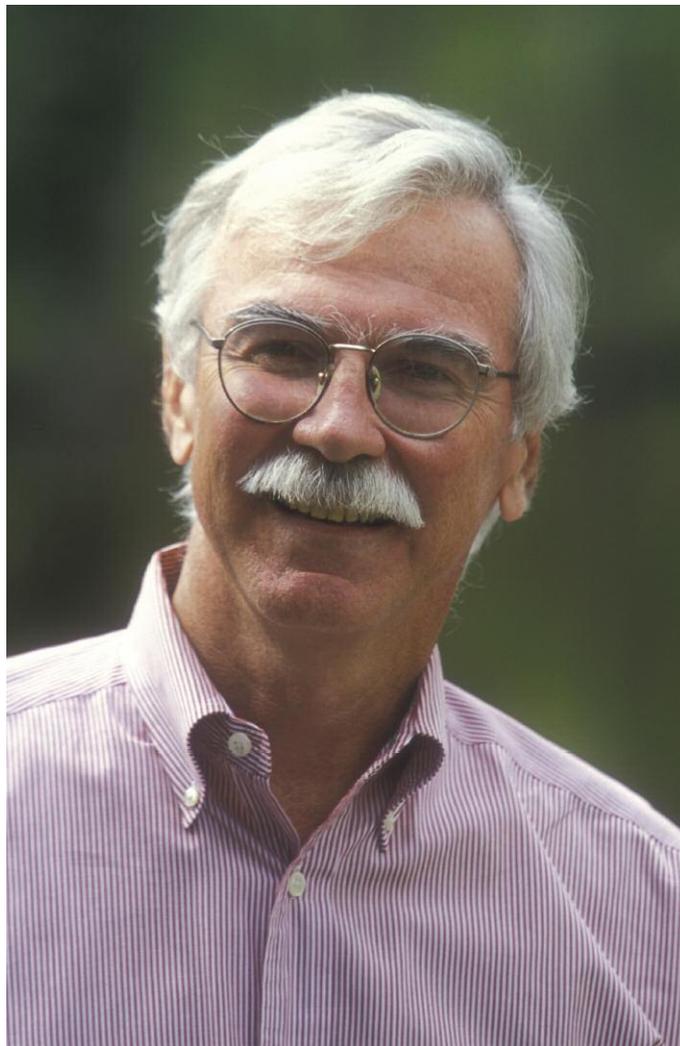
I do object to the frequent media emphasis on conflict, and on "belief" versus "skepticism" with regard to the Ivory-bill story. I prefer the language of science (discussions about evidence) to the language of religion (discussions about faith). The common ground between these two, of course, is "hope"—and, like many others, I still have some.

Birding: Besides the Ivory-bill, what is the most exciting new bird research at the Lab?

JF: Overall, the scope of research underway by faculty, staff, and students at the Lab is much, much broader than most birders realize. It's a real beehive up here in Sapsucker Woods. We have studies unveiling the detailed evolutionary history and relationships of the wood-warblers, mockingbirds, starlings, and other songbird groups; decoding the levels of information contained in complex bird songs, using Banded Wrens in Costa Rica; solving the riddle of why parrots are such outstanding mimics; exploring the ecology of disease in bird populations, focusing on the House Finch eye disease; and looking at the effects of environmental stressors such as acid rain

and mercury on forest bird populations. Our bio-acoustics lab is using new acoustic software allowing real-time processing of sounds, which we hope to apply at a continental scale to monitor the nocturnal migrations of birds.

Citizen science is pivotal to many of our projects. We are starting an urban initiative to evaluate the importance of green spaces at multiple scales within cities and dense suburbs. eBird has really taken off, with up to 40,000 checklists now being submitted each month, which are being merged with dozens of other regional and continental



John Fitzpatrick. © Jon Reis.

monitoring data to form the “Avian Knowledge Network.”

Birding: Why does the Lab maintain such an enormous library of bird sounds?

JF: The Lab is actively expanding our Macaulay Library as the world’s largest scientific archive of animal behavior, with videos and still images as well as nearly 200,000 audio clips. Uses for this material are endless, from comparative behavioral and evolutionary research to conservation-training tools, multimedia educational products, and even background sounds for Harry Potter movies. We seek high-quality cuts that depict every plumage and behavior in the bird world, and we make the entire collection accessible over the internet for everyone to use. There is no natural sound in the world that is off-limits. We have about two-thirds of the world’s birds in the collection now. Our goal is to get them all, and to make them available for everyone to use.

Birding: What did they feed the Fitzpatrick boys back in Minnesota to create such passionate conservationists?

JF: Well, I know we had to eat oatmeal every Monday morning, cream-of-wheat every Wednesday, and Ralston on Friday. The four of us were fortunate to grow up in the rural countryside north of St. Paul. The pond below our house was home to Black Terns, Soras, Pied-billed Grebes, and Marsh Wrens. We could hear Clay-colored Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks, and Bobolinks from the end of our driveway. Dad was a businessman, but also an avid sport-hunter and outdoorsman. Mom was an English teacher, and became a casual birdwatcher largely through the influence of the great wildlife artist Francis Lee Jaques, who was our neighbor. Jaques frequently talked about how painfully

sad it was to have watched the prairies and Wild West become tamed, plowed under, overpopulated, and spoiled. Jaques was a genuine hero for all four of us boys, and I have no doubt that he influenced us as much as our parents did in imparting a passionate love of nature.

Birding: What is the secret of success for your Cornell Lab Sapsuckers team in the World Series of Birding?

JF: We eat little chocolate donuts occasionally throughout the day. We are unmercifully disciplined about watching the clock and keeping to a schedule determined the night before by what birds we think we can get to. We’re dead-serious and focused, but keep each other laughing all day. Seriously, we’re all pretty good at spotting birds. The World Series of Birding is really a great event. It is a celebration of the annual spectacle of spring migration.

Birding: What will be your legacy as Director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology?

JF: I am extremely proud of the organization we are building. We now have dozens of mission-focused researchers in our staff of more than 200. We have 30,000 members (please join us!), and millions of users of our various internet sites and services. We’re publishing 50+ research articles annually. We’re contributing measurably to bird conservation in a number of ways. Our engineers and programmers are creating cutting-edge tools for monitoring and tracking birds and other creatures. Our education and citizen science staff are devising clever ways to use birds to engage diverse audiences in birds and inquiry-based science. The Lab is a very, very exciting place to work these days. I’m lucky as heck to be here with all these great people.