

A Birding Interview with Peter Pyle



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Peter Pyle grew up in a birding family, primarily in Hawaii, then spent 24 years working for Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO) as a biologist on the Farallon Islands, extensively studying bird, bat, and butterfly migration, as well as the island's marine ecosystem. Particularly intriguing were his studies of the great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*). Pyle has authored or coauthored more than 100 publications; produced the continent's primary reference for hard-core birders and banders, the *Identification Guide to North American Birds*; and was a central character in a popular book about white sharks, *The Devil's Teeth*. Part II of his *Identification Guide* was published in September 2008. Pyle currently works as a wildlife biologist at the California-based Institute for Bird Populations.

In this *Birding* interview, Pyle introspects on the appeal of birds to his personality type, recalls the bird that got him through a mental morass in Guatemala, and tackles the intimidating subject of molt.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How did you gain your broad and deep knowledge of birds, and how much do you credit your bird-expert father, Robert Pyle, for your values and career choice?

Peter Pyle: I've always been somewhat of a freak for puzzles, riddles, and games of logic: crosswords, chess, brain teasers, and sudoku squares. I helped support myself in college playing bridge for money and "counting cards" at blackjack tables in Atlantic City. When my father introduced me to birds and birding in the mid-1960s, I saw the challenges of bird identification and—later—understanding molt strategies as enticing multivariate puzzles, and my zeal for solving them awakened. Also, biologists often wind up studying organisms that reflect their own personalities, and mine may be right for birds. I tend to be a bit hyperactive, I eat on the run, and I have been blessed with good

eyesight. I am always looking around, and I enjoy long peregrinations in the field, in which each moment defines the next, so birds have a certain personal appeal. Besides introducing me to birds in the first place, my father was one of the most principled and organized persons I've ever met. Although I often fall short of his high standards, his contributions to my current interests, and my approach to them, cannot be overstated.

Birding: As a young adult, you did seasonal and temporary work—and traveled—for a number of years instead of settling into a full-time job. Was that deliberate?

PP: I like to think of it as my *Into the Wild* phase, having read Jon Krakauer's book and seen the film earlier this year. But unlike the tragic figures profiled in the book, I had birds as a concrete focal subject to guide me through the post-adolescent fog. I was a voracious reader during my late teens and early twenties—Goethe, Hesse, Casteneda, Joseph Campbell—the usual lineup for idealistic seekers trying to crack some of life's unsolvable puzzles. During the summers of 1978–1984, I worked as a seasonal biologist for the Hawaii and Micronesia Forest Bird Surveys, which allowed me to scrape by from one season to the next, as long as I volunteered here and there for housing and/or food, picked up an odd job or two, and spent most of my "cost-of-living allowance" in underdeveloped countries. I didn't quite get to the dog-food stage but certainly had my share of peanut butter, beans, and rice, and I spent many a night in roadside bushes.

A low point came in March 1981. After six months on the road in the Neotropics, I passed out in the mosquito-infested swamps of Tikal (more correctly "Mutal"), Guatemala, feverish, too sick of beans and rice to eat them and too broke to afford anything else. After a couple of bleak introspective days, a Northern Jacamar (*Galbula ruficauda*) woke me up and gave me the emotional boost to get up and observe 147 bird species in

three days, including 32 lifers. The birds had renewed my spirit, although by the time I'd hitched back to California, botfly larvae in tow, I weighed only 115 pounds, 30% below my normal weight.

A turning point came the following winter. I had decided to give enlightenment a try, having lugged copies of the *Tao te Ching* and *Tibetan Book of the Dead* more than 100 kilometers through the high-altitude backcountry of Nepal. I encountered a flock of 34 Mongolian Desert Finches (*Bucanetes mongolicus*) along the side of the path, representing something like the third record for Nepal. The finches displayed a fine diversity of pink and brown plumage aspects, not unlike those of our rosy-finches, and I couldn't help but wonder how this could be. Humans, whatever their spiritual pursuits, are just animals, after all, and what better way to understand human existence than to study birds? Anyone who has worked in a gull colony will know what I'm talking about. So I lightened my physical and spiritual loads, donated the books to a local monastery, headed off down the trail observing birds, and haven't looked back. I seem to have achieved some level of happiness doing what I do, which I suppose counts for something. Passion for what I do and extensive time in the field have helped me with the scientific side of things. I bounced around for another couple of winters, much of it in Mexico with fellow itinerant Steve Howell, before signing on as a Farallon biologist in 1985 and settling down to focus for a while on a single ecosystem.

Birding: What is so special about the Farallon Islands? What is it like studying great white sharks?

PP: Southeast Farallon Island must rank among the world's most exciting places to study wildlife, especially for an impassioned birder. I never had a dull nanosecond out there in 24 years. The vagrants added spice to our daily routines, and the migration monitoring helped us detect broad-scale population changes of many landbird species. But the real importance of the Farallon studies revolves around the marine ecosystem and how it adapts to variable oceanic and climatic conditions. Breeding seabirds are slowly recovering from a long history of human abuses, but they now face decreased productivity and other travails that come with ocean warming.

The white shark project was an outstanding challenge, due both to the subjects themselves and to the voracious human personalities the project attracted. I am proud of the project's accomplishments: initiating a drive to protect

white sharks in Californian waters, publishing 18 papers in the scientific literature, and helping change human perception of these exquisite creatures, from fearful and loathing to respectful, not only for the sharks themselves but also for the critical role they play in the balance of marine ecosystems. Personally, I especially valued the hours spent bobbing around in the dramatic elements out there, becoming familiar not just with the sharks but with the ever-changing ocean community.

Birding: Why are you intrigued by open-sea birds?

PP: As a kid on Oahu, my classmates and I would race home after school, grab our boards, and hit the water until it was too dark to see. I developed an appreciation for the ocean's overlapping rhythms, many of which we still don't understand. How marine and pelagic creatures use both



Peter Pyle with first-cycle **California Gull** beginning its first-cycle molt (pre-formative, prealternate, or a merging of the two). Bodega Bay, California; 7 September 2005. © Don Doolittle—Shearwater Journeys.

short-term (that is, immediate weather and ocean conditions) and long-term (“El Niño,” the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, and longer) cycles to their advantage is yet another great puzzle we are trying to solve, so that we can better conserve the ocean's exhausted ecosystems. And when you get right down to it, little clears the mind better than a refreshing day at sea among a dozen wheeling albatrosses.

Birding: What is the best way to learn about molt? How can molt be observed in the field, and how can molt and aging be applied to in-field bird identification?



The Los Angeles birding contingent of the late 1940s and early 1950s importantly influenced many of today's leaders in birding and field ornithology, including Peter Pyle. Clockwise around table from near left: Robert Pyle, Rolf and Jacquie Mall, Arnold and Mimi Small, and Olga and Herb Clarke. Which one would rather be birding? *Hollywood Bar of Music, California; 3 January 1953. Photo courtesy of © Olga Clarke.*

PP: Studying molt patterns forces an observer to look at individual feathers rather than plumage aspects, which greatly adds both appreciation and precision to an observation. Birding by *gestalt* is an important skill to develop, but at times it leads even the most field-tested birders astray. So, more and more, I've gone to the opposite extreme, "birding by feather." This approach entails identifying each feather's generation based on color and wear, assessing molt extent, and applying these patterns to age and identification. The advent of crisp digital imagery, easily shared via the internet, allows us to bird by feather post-hoc, opening up an entire new arena for field ornithologists.

Molt is not a user-friendly subject, but as with any new computer program, comfort levels increase quickly with a bit of use and practice. First familiarize yourself with feather tracts and the numbering of primaries, secondaries, and rectrices, which generally reflect molt sequences. Most field guides have good illustrations of bird

topography. Then learn Humphrey-Parkes (H-P) molt terminology, clarified substantially by the revisions of Steve Howell and colleagues in 2003 (*Condor* 105:635–653). Steve's articles in *Birding* that same year (35:490–496, 35:640–650) provide a good primer and should be consulted. Molt is not as difficult as it may seem. H-P terminology reflects the evolution of inserted molts (for example, the preformative and prealternate molts) within the ancestral prebasic molt cycle. Once understood, H-P terminology is a thing of beauty compared with prior molt and plumage nomenclatures. I encourage serious birders to learn H-P nomenclature and apply it to their studies of birds in the field. I guarantee that it will enhance their birding experiences.



For a photographic primer on molt terminology, please see the WebExtra that accompanies this article <aba.org/birding/v40n6p18w1.pdf>.