

A Birding Interview with Will Russell

Will Russell, the founder and former Managing Director of the Arizona-based WINGS bird tour company, has played a central role in the development of the bird tour industry, the formulation of modern bird-identification methods, and the creation of our modern birding community. He has taught and studied issues related to bird identification, distribution, and ecology; he has pursued such challenges as the identification of night-migrating birds through sound; and he founded the lively ID-Frontiers e-mail list devoted to advanced bird identification. Now semi-retired in Tucson, Russell serves as a consultant and occasional bird guide for WINGS, conducts field research, and pursues writing projects.

In this personal and thoughtful interview, Russell gives *Birding* a peek into the bird tour industry, recounts the thrill of hearing night-flying birds calling in Maine, and describes the greatest bird spectacle he never witnessed.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How did you develop your birding skill? Does it get harder as you get older?

Will Russell: I started early, when I was about six, and kept at it over the years, spending as much time in the field as possible with regular stints at banding stations and in museums. It always was and still is a passion, a fact I can't begin to explain but which I view as a godsend. I can't imagine going through life without a passion.

I'm certain that becoming a skilled birder, as with most pursuits, is more difficult if you begin as an adult or even a late teenager. Life is more complex, there are more competing interests, and perhaps our neural circuitry is less flexible. I've known only one person who began after 20 and still became a first-rate birder. However, one shouldn't confuse skill with enjoyment.

Birding: Where are some of your favorite birding places?

WR: That is not an easy question. I like to be in certain places at certain seasons where birds and landscapes combine. In North America, that would include northern New Jersey in early May, when all the leaves are new and every bird is in full song; Monhegan Island, Maine, in late September when the Maine coast is bathed in low-angled light and the wonderfully bittersweet onset of fall combines with often-abundant migrants; and Hawk Ridge in Duluth in late October, when the last of the leaves mix with sudden snow showers, and the big raptors—Northern Goshawks and eagles—come by, often surrounded by finches and other late-season migrants. In the larger world, East Africa remains *the* great natural history experience, and despite numerous visits over the years, I'd be overjoyed to find out tomorrow that I would be going back soon.

Birding: What was the most amazing bird spectacle you've witnessed?

WR: I suppose my most memorable bird spectacle is one I've never witnessed. Some years ago, during a great Northern Goshawk exodus, counters at Hawk Ridge recorded 900 birds in a single day. I'm told that, given the counting techniques they used at the time, upwards of 3,000 goshawks may have passed the ridge that day. Three thousand Northern Goshawks in a single day—I'd travel around the world to witness that.

Birding: How does being a good bird tour guide differ from being a good birder?

WR: Bird tours are more about people than they are about birds. There are a number of superb birders who in my judgment would make poor tour leaders, and there have been some birders of modest skills who have been outstanding tour leaders. It's my bias—the WINGS bias—that our leaders must be brilliant with birds, but they also need to be empathetic, charismatic, well-organ-

ized, good teachers, and, if possible, reasonably well-versed in their region's natural and social history. Not all leaders get the highest marks in all areas, but they have to surpass a fairly high threshold in each.

Birding: Why do you think people go on bird tours?

WR: For all sorts of reasons. It depends on the trip and the person. Some trips have a majority of people who want to see a specific bird or set of birds, but in many cases tours are peopled with those who like watching birds, of course, but who also come for the convenience, safety, companionship, and fun.

Birding: How has the bird touring industry evolved over the past 20 years? What changes are in store?

WR: There have been small changes, but I think there have been no major changes in the past 20 years. Technology has improved and more countries have tourist infrastructures that permit reasonably comfortable travel, but a 1989 tour looked pretty much like a 2009 tour. As for the future, who can say? I don't see anything on the horizon that will clearly change the way bird tours are run, although there are some trends that could complicate our business. If the price of oil reaches \$400 a barrel, the cost of long-distance travel might be out of the reach of an increasing share of society. Population increases might limit viewing possibilities to national parks and other public preserves—with attendant crowding, such as one already finds in some of Kenya's national parks. I think some worry that we as a people are losing touch with nature. We certainly are becoming more urbanized (and suburbanized), but bird tour participants have always tended to have above-average education and income. I think nature remains alluring to such persons, although they may come to it later in life than their more rural predecessors.

Birding: What are your tips for selecting a tour, a guide, and a company?

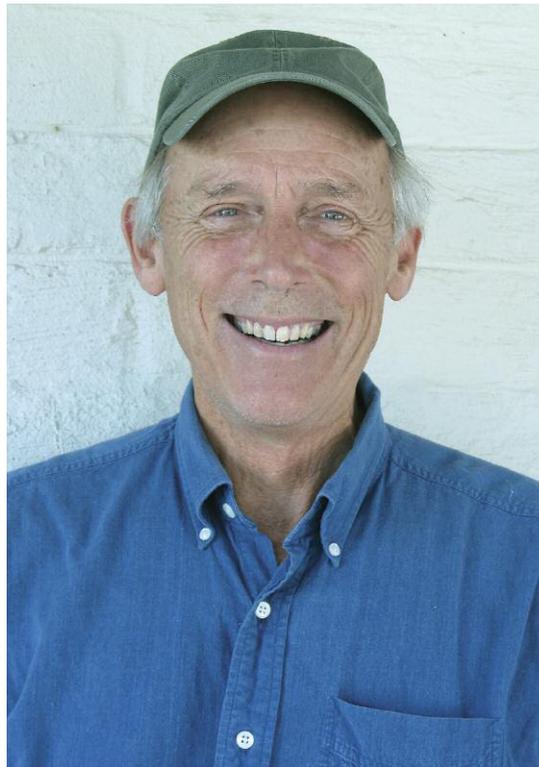
WR: Most clients come to us, and, I suspect, to most tour

companies, first and foremost via the recommendation of a friend. It's a time-tested and largely effective way of selecting a tour. Previous contact with a leader is also important, as is general reputation and visibility.

I suppose there are inept and/or dishonest tour companies out there, and I sense that most (but, amazingly to me, not all) get weeded out fairly quickly. Birding is such a popular pursuit that it should be possible to find a considerable amount of information about a company and the leader. From my perspective, the leader is the most important part of a birding tour.† A poorly organized tour with a brilliant leader can sometimes be a good tour; for most of us, a well-organized tour with a wretched leader never can.

Birding: Which do you prefer—birding in a group or alone?

WR: My idea of social interaction is not going birding with a bunch of friends, but rather an eight-person dinner party where the talk is of politics, law, and current events...and rarely birds. When I'm not with a tour, I prefer to bird alone so that I can watch something for an hour, if I wish, without disrupting someone else's plans. I like to go birding with a question or two in mind...the consistency of the pale supra-loral in Dusky Flycatcher or the call notes of Cassin's Sparrow, for example. Birding with a purpose never becomes boring.



Will Russell. Photo by © Beth McCullough.

Birding: How did you get interested in identifying night-migrating birds by sound?

WR: I spent summers on the coast of Maine, where the big push of Neotropical migrants takes place in August. There was a hill just behind our house and just back from the water, and on many August nights the migrants seemed just overhead. They would call frequently when they encountered the water, and I found the experience of sitting in the dark listening to the disembodied voices of hundreds of migrants just thrilling. At first I knew only a tiny fraction of what I was listening to, but, slowly, one after another, I'd hear the same sounds in the morning from visible migrants.

†Visit the WINGS website <wingsbirds.com/how-to-choose> for more tips on selecting a birding tour.

I never did sort them all out, and even now, with vastly more experience and with the aid of a guide to nocturnal call notes, I can't tell them all.

Birding: What is your idea of a difficult-to-identify bird?

WR: Any bird, given enough distance or poor light or difficult conditions, can be difficult to identify. That's why it's instructive to look at (or listen to) common birds longer than you need to simply to identify them. You never know when that odd going-away angle is the only view you'll get.

There are and possibly always will be birds about which we know too little to be able to separate them reliably in the field. Some meadowlarks are still a problem, as are "Western" and "Traill's" Flycatchers. DNA will likely reveal an increasing number of cryptic species, so we birders need to prepare ourselves for an increased dose of uncertainty.

Birding: Now that you're semi-retired from WINGS, where will you expend your energies?

WR: Watching birds, of course. Perhaps writing about them. And perhaps, too, more leisurely travel. I'm so used to a regime of a few days in and out that it would be nice to spend a number of days or weeks in one place and just venture out slowly on foot. I'm a licensed bander, and I find looking at birds in the hand wonderfully instructive. There are so many unknowns. There are, for example, questions about molt patterns in Rufous-winged Sparrows, two pairs of which recently colonized the desert just across the road from home. There's a project. I'll continue to lead a few tours and will remain involved with WINGS, not so much on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis but with overall planning.