Eagle-Eye Tours

Get to know your guide: Paul Prior

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Paul cannot recall a time when he was not birding, and his passion has always been for migrant songbirds. For the past decade Paul has worked as a fauna biologist with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, conducting breeding bird, frog and salamander inventories, point counts and surveys throughout the spring and summer months. Paul has been guiding for Eagle-Eye tours for over 20 years. He has guided Guyana, Patagonia Wildlife Safari, Costa Rica, Trinidad & Tobago, Puerto Rico, and Point Pelee birding tours among others. We asked Paul some questions about his interest in birds and we wanted to share them with you, so you can learn a little bit more about him and his birding passion.

How did you get started in birding?

My birding journey began a long long time ago, like a very long time ago - it's been a good 50 years ago now. It began back in southern England when I was about 12 years old, and it was my job to take the dog for a walk. I would take her to the water meadows and then just forget about her while she rambled off somewhere and I watched the lapwings and the snipes getting all upset. I was a bit ignorant at the time, I didn't really realize what the dog was doing. She was obviously disturbing these birds immensely, but in their disturbance they had all sorts of wonderful aerial displays and I was hooked - lapwings, redshanks and snipes. I suppose that was what got me into it. That was before binoculars, but then the year after that, I acquired a cheap pair of binoculars and there was no stopping me.

Did you have someone who was a birding mentor to you?

Yeah, I don't think that that was their intention, but my fellow birders, who were all a bit older than me, were my mentors. I was in my early teens and they were in there early 20s, so I was very much a figure of fun and if the birding was slow, they would usually grab me and throw me in a Bramble Bush, but it was all good fun and it was worth it because I was hanging out with what I thought were cool dudes and they were definitely finding some pretty good birds on the Dorset coast. I think the neat thing about the Dorset coast is you're right on the forefront of migration in the spring, so we would sit on the seashore and they'd point out stuff flying in off the English Channel and heading in land. I think that whole idea of visible migration was a large part of what got me even more hooked at the time.

Tell us about your work as a birder/ornithologist?

I first started banding birds at migration stations, including Portland Bird Observatory in southern England and then in Israel at Eilat. Then, about 30 years ago, I visited Canada and decided I didn't want it to be just a visit, I wanted to stay here, so I stuck around and I've been here ever since. When I came over to Canada I was one of the banders in charge at Long Point Bird Observatory. For a number of years, I worked at Long Point in one form or another, either working at the banding stations or else working with species at risk including Bald Eagles and Prothonotary Warblers.

Then, I settled down in Toronto and my job changed with a focus on breeding birds, including doing a lot of breeding bird surveys and I've loved that. I've been doing that for 20 years now with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, and every year I look forward to it. In mid-May to mid-July we are out at the best hours of the day, from 4:00 o'clock in the morning to midday, doing breeding bird surveys throughout the region. I find it really cool going back year after year to the same areas documenting the changes that are happening over time, or actually just as much, documenting the status quo - going to the same places and seeing the same species each year, at the same location - the site fidelity is something which always thrills me! When I go back, for example to a spot near Uxbridge just north of Toronto, for over 20 years there's a Black-throated Blue Warbler on territory there. It is obviously not the same bird all that time, but it will be the same bird or progeny, and it's just really cool to see them coming back to the same place each year.

Do you have a favourite bird family?

I think that shorebirds were always a real favourite because I lived very close to Stanpit Marsh in Christchurch Harbour and there were always shorebirds to see, so that was pretty special! In southern England the shorebirds weren't just passing through, they overwinter there as well, so there were three seasons of the year when there were a good number of shorebirds around. Unfortunately, here in southern Ontario that is something that I very definitely miss, but every now and again I get the opportunity to go and see shorebirds elsewhere.

What was your favourite bird encounter?

I remember one incident that sticks in my mind both positively and negatively. I was at the Long Point Bird Observatory banding and it was a pretty special time because we had a trio of Cubans who were doing some training with us. On one particular day in early May, we were having a busy morning catching birds. At one point we caught a Merlin, which was quite an unusual catch, and we got to it as quickly as possible because we didn't want it to impact the other birds in the net. We dealt with the Merlin first and let it go and then turned to the other birds that needed to be removed from those nets. I got this one bird that I thought was an Indigo Bunting and I banded it and then I'm trying to age and sex it and realized that I can't age or sex this bird, it's not even an Indigo Bunting! After reading Peter Pyle's banding guide, which was the banders bible at the time, I realized that what I had was actually a Varied Bunting, which is a bird that had never occurred in Canada before - a major vagrant! Nobody had any experience with this bird, so I called a few people, described it and they said "look if you think that's what it is, we haven't got any experience with this so if you think that's what it is, go for it!". So we went through the whole process, measurements etc, and I banded the bird. It wasn't in a gorgeous plumage, a fairly dull plumage actually because it was either a young male or female and then I took a few photographs and let it go and went on with the rest of the birds, finished the morning but the bunting was never seen again! So that was a very cool and very fun encounter, but the negative side of this memory is that a few weeks later after I've done my time at the tip of Long Point I checked my camera which for some reason was not winding properly, this is in the film days. So I took it to the camera shop and the guy went into the back and he came out a minute later with the camera opened up and there was nothing in there! And my first reaction was: oh no! somebody stole the film! But no, I hadn't put a film in there! For the entirety of May, when we had so many wonderful times with these Cubans and some really cool birds including this Varied Bunting, I hadn't taken any photographs, I won't ever live that down. Fortunately there was a guy from Quebec who had taken some photographs as well. Everything was fine in the end. There are other times, and plenty of great birding moments over the years but this is what comes to my mind first.

What is your favourite country to go birding in?

I always reckon my favourite country is the one I've just been to. I was just recently in Colombia and it was wonderful - the Santa Marta area was very special and such a unique place. I wouldn't say it's my favourite place of all, but it is way up there. Over the years the places I look back on as being the most significant for me would be Madagascar, Borneo, Patagonia and Guyana. Madagascar was absolutely mind blowing and Borneo is just amazing, but then Patagonia is such a spectacular place to be from a wildlife perspective, but also just from the landscape. Guyana is also a favourite, I suppose, just because I've gotten to know it so well. There's a couple of places in Guyana which are really spectacular like Kaieteur Falls, which is probably one of my favourite places that I have ever been to. I've been to Guyana seven times now, and I have been getting to know the great people and the wonderful forest, an incredible forest, some of the best, most intact forests I've ever visited. Out of all of those, my favourite, now that I think about it and the fact that I may never go back there again, my favourite would be Madagascar. Madagascar is a very special place.

In what ways has birding enriched your life?

Where should I begin? First of all, I should say I would never have met my wife and had a family had it not been for me following birds to Canada. In general, just the opportunity to travel, not just the opportunity but the inspiration to travel and to travel to places that perhaps people wouldn't usually go. Also, birding has introduced me to everything else in nature. Birding was a starting point I suppose, for me to become interested in everything, across the board. This recent trip to Santa Marta in Columbia I was just as taken with the plants, the orchids, the heliconias, and the frogs and the dragonflies and such. Certainly I'm still primarily a birder, but I think that I get more pleasure out of the all-round natural history appreciation it's given me over the years. It all starts off with building a bird list, but as you get into it, it's so much more than just the list, it is actually about appreciating the diversity and seeing the occasional really cool species, whether it be an insect or plant or bird or whatever. It's given me that overall appreciation, I think.

Have you visited all the places on your bucket list?

Definitely not. I love going back to the same places again and again - I get a lot of enjoyment out of doing that. I love the kind of familiarity that I've acquired over the years. But as far as a bucket list for places I still want to go, there are a couple and they're both on the far side of the world. Papua New Guinea is somewhere I would love to visit, but I'd like to be there for more than just a couple of weeks. The other location that's been hanging over me for years is Australia. Australia is another planet, it's a weird and wonderful place. I hope I do get there and that lives up to my expectations, but there's so much about Australia that I'm really looking forward to. There are also plenty of places within Africa and South America that I really want to get to again, parts of the Arctic as well.

What do you enjoy about guiding tours?

I've been guiding now since the late 90s. Obviously, I like to travel, but really it's the people. They're from all walks of life, but they all have a common interest and so conversation just runs very easily over the course of a week or two weeks. You find so much out about each other, and you share that love of nature and birds in particular and I think that's why I have really enjoyed guiding tours over the years. I really enjoy getting to know the people and seeing how much they enjoy seeing new stuff, and being in new places. I love seeing a place through new eyes. Each year in Guyana for example, there are such cool birds there, so standing there and seeing Guianan Cock-of-the-rock for the umpteenth time and standing next to someone who's seeing them for the first time and the gasp of wonder of seeing this special bird for the first time, I get to experience that through their eyes and that is pretty special.

What is the craziest thing you have done to see a bird?

I don't think I've done anything crazy to see a bird, well actually, I suppose sleeping in ditches in Europe as I traveled around trying to see as much as I could, that was pretty crazy. It was in what was then Yugoslavia - Macedonia that kind of area, and I remember getting dropped off by what was then called the Magic Bus, so I was about 18/19 years old. The Magic Bus was supposed to take you from London to Athens but I didn't want to go to Athens because that was not where all the birds were. So I got the driver of the Magic Bus to drop me off in the middle of nowhere. I could see the lights of a distant town but it was very late at night and I didn't want to walk to town, so I just slept in this ditch on the side of the road in a farm field. I remember when I woke in the morning there were a couple of soldiers standing over me with machine guns. It turns out I'd managed to get dropped off and wandered into a military area and they were having military maneuvers there. Of course they didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak a word of Yugoslavian, but they were eventually highly amused by this nerdy Englishman with his binoculars. Luckily, they just let me go and I wandered off.

What advice would you give someone starting out in birding?

Most people when they start birding, myself included, it is very much about building a list, which is great because it gets you out there and it gets you looking. But I think I would try to persuade them to maybe just look a little bit deeper. Like what these creatures mean and their place in the world. I think I would try, and get people thinking more about that bird as a completely separate individual and take some time to watch and to appreciate it and to learn from it. There's so much more going on.