

JUDY TOUPS, A TRIBUTE

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On February 27, Mississippi lost a State Treasure, Judy Touns, field birder, teacher, writer, and conservationist extraordinaire. In the early 1970's her mother gave Judy, a young Navy wife living in Biloxi, a bird feeder. Judy was introduced to her destiny. With a remarkable single mindedness she began to devote her considerable talents and fine mind to birds and birding. Gifted with the natural tools of a great field birder--a quick eye, keen hearing, a scholar's mind, and an encyclopedic memory for sight and sound--Judy set out to see all the birds in Mississippi and later in North America. In doing so she recognized the birding opportunities in this state, which is not only located on the Mississippi flyway but which contains an enviable diversity of habitat. She made the recognition of Mississippi as a birding destination, especially the Coast, one of her heart's desires. This was not an easy task at the time. Judy had no degree to give her credibility and she was a woman in a field largely dominated by men. Yet her talent and dedication won the respect of her peers. Judy became one of the first women to be elected to the board of the prestigious American Birding Association. Seeing the need to protect the Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) population on the Coast, she helped to found a local chapter of the National Audubon Society to lead in the effort. She was also a member of the Mississippi Ornithological Society.

Judy, however, is perhaps most fondly remembered as a teacher eager to share her love of birds and birding with the community. For over thirty years she wrote a weekly column in the *Sun Herald* newspaper. These informative and exquisitely written essays, true gems of prose, followed the birds through the seasons and taught innumerable students and backyard birders alike the identification and appreciation of natural wonders just outside their windows. Her book *Birds and Birding on the Mississippi Coast*, published with Jerry Jackson as co-author in 1987, remains a classic of its genre.

As a teacher of field birding she may be unsurpassed. Her students remember her creativity – teaching warbler identification with paint chips of all things – and her dedication – up and at'em at six every Saturday and Sunday morning birding all day both days for eight weeks every fall and spring. For every class every bird was presented afresh with the joy and excitement of discovery. All of Mississippi was a resource. In the winter her classes would travel to North Mississippi to see birds not found on the Coast. Bemused Delta farmers drove their tractors past shivering, but enthusiastic little groups of people were looking through scopes and binoculars at what may have been to the farmers little more than freshly plowed fields. To Judy's students those fields were treasure troves of geese, pipits and larkspurs. With experiences such as this Judy enriched, even changed, the lives of her students who under her tutelage have been in touch with wonder.

Until her last few years age and illness did little to dull Judy's powers. In 2004 she, Jerry Bird and Stacy Jon Peterson published a *Guide to Birding Coastal Mississippi and Adjacent Counties* and that same year the Mississippi

Coast Birding Trail. The almost total devastation of her beloved Coast by Hurricane Katrina, did, however, break her heart.

Judy Toups is not altogether lost to us. All Mississippi as a whole has gained significance, as she hoped it would, as a state whose many assets for birders will continue to be worthy of enjoyment and preservation.