

JUDY TOUPS: FOR THE BIRDS

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When I first met Judy Toups, in June 1975 at a Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) colony in Gulfport, Mississippi, we hit it off right away – but tenuously. I was “Dr. Jackson – the ornithologist from Mississippi State University,” and Judy was a local birder – older than I was by 13 years, a local leader of all things birding, and incredibly active and knowledgeable of Gulf Coast birds – even though she had just taken up birding in a big way in about 1972. We were both timid in our pronouncements of identification of less familiar birds – she apparently in awe of my education and title, and I because I knew I didn’t know the local birds as she did. The ice was soon broken as we each made a few mistakes in the company of one another, laughed about them, and learned from them. We acknowledged through mutual respect our individual strengths and weaknesses and learned from one another.

For nearly three decades, whenever I went to the Gulf Coast, Judy was likely to be the first person I would contact. She was always in touch with what was happening with birds on the Gulf Coast. Her home, sofa, and floor were always open. She became birding mentor to both me and my students. Her gravelly voice, the sparkle in her eyes, and her

loving “house mother” approach made her legendary among generations of my students. Of course she was also legendary for the number of cigarettes she enjoyed – no doubt contributing to her gravelly voice. But Judy was always – always respectful with her smoking. On long trips she looked forward to the next stop and it could be a running joke. She would sometimes ask me “How are we doing on gas?” and I would know it was time for a break. She would be the first out of the van with binoculars around her neck and a cigarette ready to light away from the group.

Judy flew aerial surveys with me over the barrier islands off the Mississippi coast and went with me several times by boat to the islands. I remember one cold winter day when we went to Horn Island. The waves were bad. I had to anchor offshore, and we would have to wade in. Judy was cold and not feeling well; she decided she had best wait in the boat rather than get thoroughly soaked. I said “Judy, would you trust me to carry you ashore?” She eagerly responded, “Would you?” And I did.

I also initiated Judy into the fold of “professional ornithology” and she learned the importance of documentation and record keeping. She passed it on and became “advisor” in my absence when graduate students such as Martha Hays and Wayne Weber worked on the coast. Judy’s leadership and influence with the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society (of which she was a founder in 1975) introduced me to new friends, providing me with additional eyes and ears on the coast and very importantly, local moral and logistical support for our research.

Judy’s influence and importance was not only to birders and to ornithology, but to birds. This is demonstrated

by her drive and ability to get things done through her skill with words. The weekly column she wrote for the Gulfport newspaper, the *Sun Herald*, beginning in 1976 and running for more than 30 years, informed the community of events in nature, united the community in protecting wild things, and helped swell membership of the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society and Mississippi Ornithological Society. She was always positive, always informative, and always ready to look around the next bend. Could she ever write! My ego reached an all-time high as a result of a column she wrote in 1982, describing how we had met and many of our adventures (Toups 1982). Judy had an enormous capacity to win people over to birds and birding. Birds gave her joy – and she always passed that joy on.

Judy was intimately involved with the Mississippi Ornithological Society (MOS), and served as MOS secretary (1977-1980), MOS Newsletter editor (1981-1986), and president (1986-1988). She also played an active role on the board of directors of the American Birding Association (1988-1991) and put coastal Mississippi on the “must visit” list of birders around the world. She regularly taught Elderhostel classes in birding and was regularly available for advice and often hours afield for itinerant birders.

One of Judy’s defining efforts was the protection of Least Terns and Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*) that nest on the beach in Gulfport, Biloxi, and other areas along Mississippi’s mainland coast. Early efforts of the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society were led by Judy, and detailed in an article she wrote for *The Mississippi Kite* (Toups 1976). It was in part through her encouragement that my students and I continued working with Least Terns and Black Skimmers.

On the afternoon of 11 July 1981, Opal Dakin, one of my graduate students, and I were collecting behavioral data at a Black Skimmer colony on the Biloxi beach in front of the Veteran's Administration hospital. We were parked in the public parking lot along U.S. 90 less than 30 meters from the center of the colony as we recorded nest attendance and interactions among the birds. The colony stretched for nearly 150 meters along the beach and occasionally people walking on the beach at the water's edge would disturb the birds. When many of the adult skimmers suddenly took flight we saw two 9-13-year-old boys near the east end of the colony throwing sticks at the flying birds. We then saw them chase a two-week-old chick, capture it, toss it into the air, and hit it like a baseball with a bat-sized stick. I jumped from the vehicle and ran to them as quickly as I could without stepping on eggs or chicks. By the time I reached them they had killed over 40 chicks and smashed several eggs. I gave both a stern lecture and they responded by saying their mother said they could do it. They left and I called Judy. She immediately came to the colony and Judy took us to the newspaper office with film I had used to document the atrocity. What ensued as a result of Judy's, the *Sun Herald's*, and Gulf Coast Audubon's efforts and the cooperation of many local people and government offices was a conservation effort that continues to this day and is now known around the world. It is known under the title "Nest in Peace" – a slogan that appeared on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and signs posted in the Gulfport colonies within days of the incident (Jackson and Jackson 1985).

In May 1977, we hosted the annual meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Society, a professional organization that prides itself on including many avocational ornithologists among its members. Jay and Judy Touns

attended that meeting and Judy contributed to it as a member of the local committee and in leading field trips. In March 1980, Judy again attended a Wilson Ornithological Society meeting. This time she traveled with me and a group of students from Mississippi State to Corpus Christi, Texas.

After we left Mississippi State in 1999, I rarely got to see Judy, but she contacted me two or three times a year with questions or comments – always active, continuing to write her weekly column, always getting things done for birds and birders. When I was asked to give a lecture for Mississippi Audubon and lead a field trip to Tensas National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana on 11 February 2005, I was so pleased that Judy was there. We spent a wonderful day in the field together – birding and reminiscing. What a grand lady!



Judy and Jerry on 11 Feb. 2005
(Photo courtesy of Jerry Jackson)

Judy died on 27 February 2007, but her legacy can be seen in each new bird we encounter, many arriving with the warm breezes of spring. And we can watch her legacy – and our own – grow by taking others to the fields and shore as she did to find the joy of birding.

Literature Cited

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