

Pete Dunne



## Birds and insight in Ol' Miss

other people's fortune. Birdlife, like economic hardship, is pretty much taken for granted hereabouts—because there is a lot of it.

Undoubtedly Jim Lane navigated this coastal stretch while sketching out his guides to birding Florida and the Texas Coast. But birding's great path finder never committed the place to paper, never versed the birding merits of Logtown, Lucky's Corner or set down the considerable charms of the Pascagoula spoil impoundments. That had to wait until Judy Toups, birder, and Jerome Jackson, ornithologist/birder, published *Birds and Birding on the Mississippi Coast* in 1987. Don't misconstrue. No criticism intended. I guess what I am wondering is why a terrific piece of birding real estate has been heretofore under birded?

Friendship and a speaking engagement (not delusions of Lewis and Clark), were the catalysts that propelled me to coastal Mississippi in mid-January, 1989. The holidays were over, the Mardi Gras merely a threat. And Continental's \$210 roundtrip airfare from Newark, New Jersey, to The Big Creole would make even an impoverished birder smile.

Continental didn't even lose my bags.

My guide and muse was Judy Toups, described by a friend as the youngest 57-year-old grandmother on the birding circuit. Her supporters have been recruited through her weekly birding column, identification

Aerial view of Horn Island, Mississippi.  
Photograph/Jerome A. Jackson.

UNTIL RECENTLY YOU COULD have rifled the bookstore racks and scanned the catalogues until your blood sugar levels bottomed out, but you wouldn't have found a birding guide to Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson counties, Mississippi—a corner of Americana where coffee is an art form, tea is *never* served hot, and cordiality is an unspoken fact. It's a land of marsh and pines and shotguns perched in the windows of pickup trucks; of motels boasting \$18 rooms, and conversations in breakfast cafes that focus on cars, football, and



*Round Island in the Mississippi Sound offers great birding adventure. Photograph/Charles F. Delmas.*

courses and the local Audubon Chapter she started, are legion. Her interest in exposing the Gulf Coast's birding wealth to a broader constituency should be no hard task since she starts with a big, fat bankroll of nesting, wintering, and migrating birds.

From New Orleans, *enroute* to Hancock County, westernmost of Mississippi's three coastal counties, we nosed onto the old coastal track. The bayous were thick with herons, egrets, White Ibises and wintering waterfowl; the roadside deep in trash—which prompted Judy to apologize for the unsightliness and to upbraid the manners of locals. Roadside clutter notwithstanding, the marshes that bind the ocean and the pines are alluring

and alluvial and for a birder from the snow belt, worth the price of admission all by themselves.

Port Bienville, first stop on our first full day of birding, proved to be an industrial park under the jurisdiction of the Hancock County Port Authority. Birders are welcome, hunting is not. At the checkpoint, raised binoculars are as good as a written pass.

The well-logged area (*i.e.*, clear cut) has given way to grass and assorted sparrows and a good shot at resident Black-shouldered Kites.

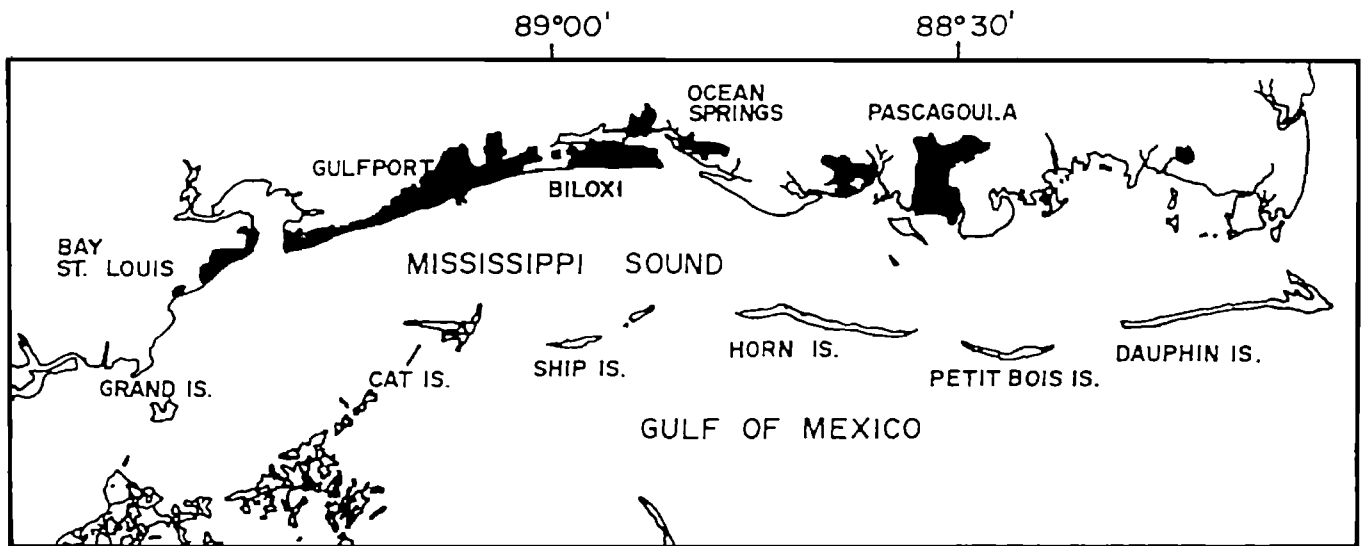
Grasshopper, LeConte's, and a clutch of burley Vespers sparrows were almost compensation for the phantom kites. An everyday looking hedge produced an Orange-crowned

Warbler, a White-eyed Vireo, thrasher, towhee, and small flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers conservatively estimated to number about a heptabillion.

Loggerhead Shrikes outnumbered the plentiful mockingbirds.

The Black-shouldered Hawks, two of them, were waiting at Lucky's Corner, a pasture whose adjacent wood-side boasts Bachman's Sparrow, and at times, such fortuitous local rarities as Swainson's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon (hence the name, Lucky's Corner).

The Waveland Lagoon is one of those perennial birding meccas, a sewage treatment pond, and the time is probably not far off when the Com-



mon Black-headed Gull will turn up among the throngs of Bonaparte's Gulls that bob along on the lagoon's suspect principle. During the coastal fallouts that inundate the coast of Mississippi with cross-gulf migrants, adjacent woodlands can vibrate with feeding warblers. Now, in January, they vibrated with kinglets . . . and another (maybe two) heptabillion Yellow-rumpeds.

Do not, in your enthusiasm, stray past the point of firm footing. In addition to the usual good reasons to stay out of sewage pools, this impoundment boasts another. It is home to an alligator of troublesome proportions.

Harrison County, offers 26 miles of open beach—26 miles of open *man-made* beach.

Your tax dollars at work.

Common Loons, Horned Grebes, and Lesser Scaup rest within comfortable scanning distance offshore. Laughing and Ring-billed gulls dot the beach; Brown Pelicans patrol the horizon. Least Terns, about 10,000 strong, are still somewhere beyond the horizon and will not return to these beaches until March. Before the beach, completed in the 1950s to buffer homes from hurricane tides, there were no breeding terns, here.

We were treated to what are called "good birds" in the old birding racket—though not the *same* good birds. The Red-throated Loon (of which I can see 1000 in a single scan in Delaware Bay) is not a stock model wintering bird in Mississippi. On the other hand, Reddish Egrets are far from annual in New Jersey. In fact,

the most recent sighting antedates any known records.

The day's tour ended at Lydia Schultz's backyard—winter home of Mississippi's first and second records of the Buff-bellied Hummingbird. Amazing what a few strategic and well tended hummingbird feeders might attract on a temperate coast.

I could go on, and in fact, the next day I did, exploring more of the Mississippi Gulf's birding hotspots—including Larue Road, the Seaman Road Sewage Lagoon, and the Pascagoula River Marsh. All of them are compelling; all were, as promised, eminently birdable places offering a wealth and diversity of birdlife. But I wonder if you, like I, in my capacity as birder on site, have discerned a certain common thread running through our birding sites? Every location we birded was man-made—or at least in man-altered, habitat. Pastures, pine plantations, corporate zones, spoil impoundments, sewage pools. If concentrations and variety are what you seek, seek altered habitat.

Mississippi is not unique in this respect. Contemplate your personal birding turf, as I was suddenly compelled to do, and, see what you get. Take, for example the South Cape May Meadows in Cape May. There is no question that the place is a magnet for migrating birds but it is hardly natural land. The onetime salt marsh was diked before Peterson published his guide. It served as a military airport in the 1940s and was converted to a golf driving range following the end of hostilities. Until 1987 it served

as a badly overgrazed pasture—but the Buff-breasted Sandpipers loved it

Take a look at Cape May Peninsula itself. The concentrations of birds there are justly famous. But to what degree are those concentrations caused by numbers of migrants and restricted land mass—or, now, insufficient habitat spawned by overdevelopment?

The truth is, many terrific birding spots are very often accidental by-products of human alteration of habitat. I am hardly an advocate of wholesale development. I live in New Jersey! I see the houses going up day by day and spring by spring and I hear fewer and fewer Red-eyed Vireos. But if humanity is hell bent on rearranging the planet might it be possible to do it in a fashion that accommodates birds? While we are striving mightily to preserve that which is, is there perhaps a way to direct the course of that which will necessarily be?

If, for example, a headquarters-minded corporation is going to carve up a woodland might they be persuaded to put in a pond with a shallow marshy edge (instead of a kidney shaped, gravel sided trough with a brace of pinioned swans dumped in the middle). Maybe there is another South Cape May Meadows buried in the plans for that proposed bayside retirement community?

Or a Pascagoula Marsh? Or a buffering beach where 6000 pairs of Least Terns can deposit their eggs?

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