

by Susan Roney Drennan

McCASKIE *as* mentor

Guy McCaskie doesn't look like an agent for revolution, but many of his fellow birders see him that way. For McCaskie raised the status of observation of complex avian events to a highly sophisticated part of the scientific procedure. He discovered serendipitously the large-scale and frequent occurrence of vagrants in California and took the lead in systematically exploiting that boon. He recognized the densifying properties of desert oases and coastal sites. In the process he discovered many hitherto unrecognized or totally neglected aspects of the bird life of California.

As a result, he found birds where no one before him had dreamed of looking and set into motion the gears of change for the whole birding community through his leadership and example. He defined the leading edge for a generation of birding innovators by developing a method of critical field observation that was unique when he started and which, for many, is now the standard.

Who can sort out the unique combination of nurture, nature, free will, and who knows what else that causes

someone to take a particular course in life? Born in Scotland and today in his mid-fifties, McCaskie is a civil engineer, a profession he's pursued for nearly three decades. He's upright, more than six feet tall, burly, with a thick bush of silver-gray hair swept back. His voice is rich, clear, and marked with a touch of Scottish accent. His speech is direct, assertive, often exaggerated but never self-conscious. Although no single label defines him, nor is it clear how the many parts of the man add up to the

whole, it is possible to trace the emergence of Guy's passion back to his adolescent years in Great Britain.

"When I was a school kid in Wales, I came up under a different environment. In the group that I was in, it was the done thing to go bird-nesting and take birds' eggs. As a small kid I had no problem climbing up trees and taking eggs, that didn't bother me. I always used to go up to see whether they were occupied. I took the eggs home because I had a collec-

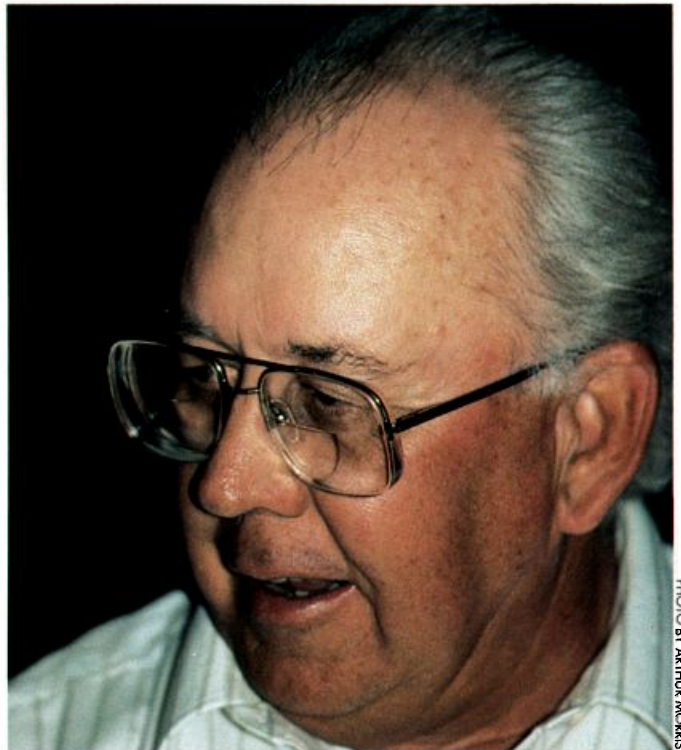


PHOTO BY ARTHUR MORRIS



PHOTO BY LEE STALLCUP

FACING PAGE: R. Guy McCaskie in 1992. **TOP:** P. William Smith left, McCaskie center, and Rich Stallcup birding in Alameda County, Ca. in 1958. **RIGHT:** California birders in Stovepipe Wells, Death Valley N.M. in 1974 from left to right; Van Remsen with Least Bittern, Guy McCaskie, Jon Dunn, John Luther, Steve Summers, Lee Jones (hidden behind).



PHOTO BY DON ROBERSON

tion. I don't know what ever happened to it. Anyway, very quickly I became proficient because instead of just looking randomly for birds' nests and eggs, I learned which species nested where and got good at finding all the eggs that nobody else could find. Pretty soon I decided that that wasn't very much fun for the birds."

He can still remember vividly his admiration of and desire for approval from his own mentor, as well as his eagerness to emulate him.

"A fellow named Bill Condry was my math teacher. He also was involved with protection of the Red Kite. The school was in an area where Red Kites were found and one day I found a nest. I climbed up to the nest to look for eggs, and I thought "I shouldn't take these." So I didn't. I went back and told my math teacher that I had found a Red Kite. That was the end of it. I never took eggs again. But after that instead of going out and playing cricket, I used to go with this math teacher and look for kites and other birds' nests. I don't know when I first got binoculars. I may have had them by then. Probably an old pair

that my grandfather threw away. But it was at that stage that I became fairly interested in birds, and started keeping notes. I actually have notes back to about 1948."

By the time he was 17, he'd already set the pattern for his vagrant-seeking. Birding had become the uncontested object of his passion which he carried on unabated throughout the remainder of his teens and twenties.

"I went to Fair Isle, Scotland when I was probably 17, looking for rare birds. They had a Lesser Golden-Plover on Fair Isle ... that was my first. I was in what was the equivalent of high school — like a first-year boarding school. There you had to have a hobby — participate in some sort of interest of your own. Stamp collecting or train watching or whatever it was. But, you had to become involved. There was an afternoon set aside once a week for hobbies. And I was into bird watching. We had a little bird club, and a good one which I became president of. We'd go out and look at birds and keep notes. We knew which shorebirds came through in the spring and fall and we'd get the

arrival and departure dates and different interesting things about them. Then when I got drafted in Britain — of course you got drafted at 18 and went into the Army. I got a post in the general intelligence branch of headquarters command up in Scotland in Edinburgh Castle. There I was fortunate enough to get involved with some active, better-than-average bird watchers. One of the people that I did get out into the field with occasionally was a fellow by the name of Maury Meiklejohn, who I think is a legend in his own time. We would go out looking for vagrants, you know, rarities. We simply knew what was common there by analyzing what had occurred in other areas and when it occurred and what it looked like, so we'd start looking for things that were out of the ordinary. We made life a little exciting by looking for the unusual. "

Guy moved to the United States in 1957, flush with the energy and enthusiasm of his 20 years, and immediately began combining exhilarating adventure with intellectual discovery. He applied his first-rate critical intelligence to learning this new avifauna and devouring the available published

resources. And then the fun began. Imagine the surprise of local birders when this young upstart delivered on what seemed like very rash predictions.

“When I came over here, my mother had a house in northern California. I lived and worked there. I got to know the birds of the Sierras and in the late '50s, I more or less learned the regular California birds. I familiarized myself with a whole group of birds I didn't know. The waterbirds, the shorebirds, were only somewhat unusual at that point. But the landbirds were all different. Once I became very familiar with the common birds, then the uncommon ones stood out amongst them.

JOSEPH R. JEHL

Research Ornithologist, Author, Director of Research Hubbs Sea World Research Institute

Several factors have been important in maintaining the high rate of increase in additions to the California bird list: the increasing number and sophistication of birders; recognition that vagrancy is a widespread and regular phenomenon; an appreciation of the concentrating effects of desert oases and coastal “hot spots,” which are birded constantly during migration periods; and the establishment of a research station on the Farallon Islands. The first three of these, and indirectly the fourth, in my opinion, can be traced to the influence - the leadership and teaching - of Guy McCaskie. It is no coincidence that the sharp increase began about 1960, shortly after his arrival in the state.

I had European guides with me. I loved Hoffmann, *Birds of the Pacific States*. I still treasure it. I had the Audubon Dick Pough series, and I had the old Peterson. I certainly had Grinnell and Miller [*The Distribution of the Birds of California* by J. Grinnell and A.H. Miller, 1944] which I treasured and memorized. Back in those days I'd certainly grab at any book that had anything to do with birds; anything that had any information that might help me. I'd just buy them up.

In that winter of '57, I had already learned about the Golden Gate Audubon Society. I went on some of their field trips. Then I ended up doing the Christmas Bird Count at Point Reyes which I thought was just

great, really a lot of fun. By that time, I'd already met two or three people that liked to go and look for birds. I'd run into Rich Stallcup by the end of '57 and by '58 we were out birding together. When I came to California,

Rich was the person I birded with most often. Paul DeBenedictis was an active birder and we birded together in those days.

When I came here I realized that the birding style was very simple. If you

SCOTT TERRILL

Ornithologist, Ecological Consultant

In a broad sense, Guy revolutionized field ornithology in California and this influence is now continentwide. On a more personal note, I certainly owe a lot to Guy. My field abilities benefitted tremendously under his influence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, Guy's original observations regarding the migratory behavior of insectivores in early winter in the southwest deserts provided the original impetus for much of my masters, doctoral and post-doctoral research on the regulation of migratory behavior at this time of year.

wanted to go and see Lawrence's Goldfinches, you went up to the Livermore Canyon area where there were lots of goldfinches. When you wanted to see Harlequin Ducks, they were always at the end of Tomales Point and you went there. The mere fact that there were trees right behind you that might have had all kinds of neat eastern warblers, you were oblivious to. You walked right by those. The local birders went on organized field trips. But they didn't go to particular places in particular seasons to see what was there; they would go to see specific birds that they knew were there. They'd seen them there last year at that time, and they went to look at them again. And that was very simple. It was so simple that you could probably make your bird list before you ever went out in the morning.

And then you'd merely confirm that you did see everything that you anticipated seeing. Nothing more.

That wasn't the type of birding that I'd done in Britain or Scotland. I

KENN KAUFMAN

Author, Associate Editor for American Birds

As a kid in the Midwest, I had memorized the range descriptions given in the bird guides that were standard at the time. So I thought I knew which birds were found where. Then about 1965, when I was eleven, I started reading *Audubon Field Notes*. Of all the regional reports, I was most amazed by the Southern Pacific Coast Region — what were all those eastern warblers doing in California? What on earth was a Red-throated Pipit? Who was this “GMcC” who was finding all these extraordinary birds? For me, half a continent away, McCaskie's work was the wake-up call: the signal that there were still things unknown out there.

thought that it was sort of nice, pretty mild, but it could be more exciting. I mean, when I came here nobody even knew where to go to find a Pectoral Sandpiper because people didn't know where any of this stuff was. They just knew what they saw in their own little area — common breeding birds.

I can remember very well, one of the earlier times that Rich Stallcup was with me. We'd gone to Grinnell and Miller and studied what was around and then studied all of the recent publications and we concluded that the first of October was the time to see Tropical Kingbird on the coast of California. Why there were three records in California! They were all right around the first of October! We were scheduled to lead a field trip for the Golden Gate Audubon Society on the first of October and when people arrived they said, "Well, what are we going to see?" And we said, "We're going to look for Tropical Kingbirds."

The most remarkable thing was we found a Tropical Kingbird. That was totally remarkable. They just absolutely could not believe that we had, at the start of the trip said, "We're going to look for Tropical Kingbird," and we found one. I think an awful lot of people didn't realize what might

KIMBALL GARRETT
Curator, Section of Birds and Mammals, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Author

That Guy McCaskie revolutionized California birding is a cliché and an understatement. He taught us that birding can be surgical and rigorous (yet always fun), that there is rhyme and reason to the occurrence of vagrants, and that a birder's true legacy is that which is in print.

Guy, the storyteller, can make a ten-hour drive to northern California seem to pass in an instant. In addition to his legendary disdain for correct spellings, Guy also has something of a reputation for impatience with careless birders. No one wishes to be on the wrong end of Guy's acerbic outpourings. But he is generous with his knowledge and experience with a genuinely interested novice. Guy has nurtured the budding talents of young birders in California for over thirty years with a blend of attention to scientific aspects of birding, including judicious specimen collecting, and the thrill of listing and chasing. Guy has been remarkably patient with me, from my first rarity report as a wild thirteen year old to my many requests for ornithological assistance to this day.

happen if you simply predict something like that. But, it is pretty simple when you look back at it now."

By 1962, it was time for Guy to think about his college studies. How did he choose which school to attend? Well, while some students focus on celebrity professors, teacher to student ratios, and relative tuition costs, McCaskie assessed the situation and decided that the San Diego area was avian *terra incognita*. It was close to the coast and

presented untold opportunities to see water and pelagic species and all those that might follow the coast south in migration. Without a moment's hesitation, he decided to enroll at San Diego State. The fact that its engineering program enjoyed a superb reputation seemed a secondary consideration. Feeling young and riding the crest of life he began satisfying his voracious appetite for the feast of birding with lip-smacking gusto — using the smorgasbord approach. Do you get the impression that his studies were merely an interruption of that perpetual birding blitz?

"I simply geared my life around making sure all my grades were okay while having enough time to go birding. I was carrying a pretty heavy load in school but I made sure that I had weekends clear. I would study til late at night and I very quickly learned to get by on 6 hours sleep. In San Diego I birded by myself until people started catching on that this was fun. Then they joined me.

In the fall of '62 I was looking at some fennel in the yard of a friend who had found a Virginia's Warbler in it a few days before, and I thought: "There's lots of that stuff down in the Tijuana River Valley. I wonder

ELLA SORENSON

Author

In 1983 I was an obscure isolated beginner birder wandering around Utah with my family and a field guide. On a visit to San Diego I observed a flock of Black Skimmers and called the appropriate *American Birds* regional editor. "Mr. McCaskie" I called him then and I quickly slipped into a mentor/sponge relationship. Perhaps it was fate. Today, my McCaskie file contains numerous letters on single-spaced pages almost entirely on bird identification, status, and distribution. There have been many phone calls; no question was ever too insignificant. He always gave encouragement when the inevitable criticism came.

Utah's new improved checklist was published in 1985. And the gigantic contribution Guy McCaskie made to the knowledge of Utah bird status and distribution continues to spread throughout the state. Most Utah birders don't even know how much they owe him.

Now, every time a new and exciting bird project comes my way I tell him that he's to blame. He laughs and thinks I'm joking. But I'm not.

JANET WITZEMAN

Former American Birds Regional Editor for the Southwest Region, Writer

When Kenn Kaufman and I became regional editors for the Southwest Region in *American Birds*, we agreed that our model was the column written by Guy for Southern California. We studied his to see how to do it right. They included not only the necessary names, dates, and places, but also the significance of each record, which resulted in their being educational as well as documentary. McCaskie was one of a handful of writers who served as role models for beginning Regional Editors like us.

My first knowledge of identification and distribution of gulls and pelagic birds came from Guy when I started going on pelagic trips off the coast of San Diego. Over the years my knowledge, and that of countless others, increased by listening to his thoroughly researched and informative presentations at birding and ornithological meetings.

Finally there is the undeniable magic that occurs when Guy is birding. If there is an unusual bird in the area, he will find it. Or more to the point, if he is there an unusual bird will appear!

whether warblers really like it?" So I went down, and I went up to the biggest clump of fennel that I knew of. I squeaked at it, and out jumped three Virginia's Warblers and a Painted Bunting. I thought that was just great and immediately decided that this fennel was the greatest stuff in the world. After I got sort of tired of poking my nose into fennel, I sort of noticed the tamarisk trees and I thought, "Let's see what's in this stuff." And, my god! I found a Tennessee Warbler and a redstart and the next thing I knew I had Blackpoll Warblers and all of a sudden these trees were better than the fennel. By the end of the fall of '62, I had some idea that the tamarisks and the fennel and anything down in the Valley was pretty fancy. It took me another fall to realize that in addition to all that, I should be looking in the fields because there I found Bobolinks and Dickcissels and Clay-colored Sparrows, and that if you went out in the dirt fields you found longspurs. I found that I could spend an entire weekend down there. It was totally absorbing. I was always exploring - looking for what I could find. It would keep me completely involved from dawn til dusk. Once I found that gold mine, I wasn't look-

ing for a second one. It took 2 or 3 years to really catch on to what was going on in total.

After the fall of '62, and especially by '64 people were picking it up and starting to look at clumps of trees anywhere along the coast. They got involved in this thing and sort of joined in the fun. A lot of people would actually drive down from the Bay Area to San Diego, merely to go bird watching and spend a weekend birding in the Tijuana River Valley. In those earlier days it was the mecca. Clearly, with our current knowledge, there's no need to drive to the Tijuana River Valley to see that stuff.

Curiosity is Guy's greatest addiction. By the late sixties and early seventies, he and those with whom he most preferred to spend his leisure time had discovered the joys of birding the desert and coastline.

"From there it didn't take too long to figure out that things out in the desert were equally good. As more people became involved, other areas were explored and then I very quickly became aware that Point Loma was as good as the valley and that there were places up the coast that were good."

Point Loma is obviously still "good" for it is here that Guy found, in the autumn of 1991, a Eurasian species never before seen in the contiguous United States making it the season's rarest bird — Little Bunting.

Few enjoy talking more and, for that matter, are more enjoyable to listen to than Guy McCaskie. His facility of expression, singular presence, and marvelous animation make it all the better. He is a consummate storyteller and every one is full of treasures, witty, and marvelously timed. He spins out yarns with becoming relish much like Will Rogers and cannot resist embroidering them. A sympathetic audience is manna to him. It is then that he is joyfully in high command. Often his conversation is

PAUL LEHMAN

Editor of Birding Magazine

I moved from New York to California in 1974, and immediately became immersed in the birding culture, which was spawned by Guy McCaskie during the previous decade. Despite birding in the East from age nine and birding with some of the region's best before going west, I was struck by how much I learned about eastern species from Guy and others he had influenced. Because they were interested in finding and identifying vagrants, they examined each individual more critically than most birders where these species are common. Guy also compared these birds in detail to other vagrants and to the commoner western species with which they might be confused. As a result, Guy and others taught me—an easterner — much about the identification of the trickier eastern species.

transformed by sheer enthusiasm into a near-monologue that may be brilliant but disconcertingly difficult to respond to. It is easy to listen to him describe *con brio* the early days of discovery in California.

“I loved it. They were all life birds for me. I thought it was great. We had formed ideas of what we should see from previous patterns of rare birds. By the time I had moved to San Diego, Rich was still up in Point Reyes. I was working down here and Rich was working up there. We were corresponding quite a bit and he was finding that all he had to do was locate an isolated cypress tree and I was telling him all I was doing was finding the isolated clumps of tamarisk. We kept shuffling information back and forth about what we were doing, and I think we were each trying to find something in our own little patch that was equivalent to what the other one had in his patch. He had cypress trees, I had tamarisk trees. He had lupins, I had fennel. He had dirt fields and I had dirt fields. He had long grass and I had alfalfa. We just kept trying to see what was each other’s

sort of equivalent and we were finding the same sort of things. I think we each spurred the other one on.

I also had been dreaming for things like Sprague’s Pipits and it was while looking for Sprague’s that I ran into Red-throated Pipits. In those days the Valley was much more agriculturally oriented than it is today. They had these tomato fields they’d plow and then they’d take this chicken manure and spread it all over the fields and plow that in. And at that point clouds of flies were attracted to it. This mess was incredible!! There were hundreds of Horned Larks coming for this stuff. And pipits, in early October. I simply realized that this stuff was worth looking through. I was specifically looking for longspurs. And so I was out there thinking, “This is the stuff.” I knew that if you persisted in it and just searched through that mess carefully, you could find longspurs. I also knew there was a thing called a Sprague’s Pipit. And I thought, “Well, why wouldn’t there be a Sprague’s Pipit with these Water Pipits?” Looking back, it was not a very good conclusion, because the two obviously don’t use the same habitat. But WHAMO!

I found a bird that had stripes all over its back. So I thought, “Well, that’s kind of nice. I’m not sure that it’s a Sprague’s Pipit, but it’s sure something different.” And very fortunately, there was actually a small group of them on that first day, which included adults with red on them. And it was sort of pretty basic.

I mean, I’m standing there looking at a pipit that has a red throat. First of all I was from Britain and I had a field guide that had a Red-throated Pipit in it, so I knew there was such a bird. Pictures of them were pretty vivid in my memory. I also had Alaskan books at that time like the *Birds of Alaska* by Gabrielson. Red-throated Pipit was in there. I knew it bred in extreme western Alaska. I was also fully aware, because I had the A.O.U. Check-list, that there was a record of a Red-throated Pipit from the tip of Baja. So this was not totally out of the realm of possibility. And here was a bird with a red throat in front of me.

At this time I was also collecting. The museum had gotten me a collecting permit. I mean it was just common sense; if you want to make anything out of it, you’d better bring

RICHARD STALLCUP *Author, Teacher, Tour Leader, one of the principal founders of Point Reyes Bird Observatory*

Guy’s arrival in California in the late 1950s was to cause, not only a CHANGE in North American Ornithology, but a RENAISSANCE. Birdwatching was about to have its definition remodeled and its confining protocol burst open.

Many experts on regional distribution and identification, promptly became students. College professors and curators at natural history museums were to be surprised, and, perhaps a bit embarrassed at how much had been overlooked and, eventually, most professional avian biologists would become convinced that collecting bird specimens was no longer necessary to prove extralimital occurrences. Guy’s lead in the founding of the California Bird Records Committee, the first such body in the United States, was to soon accomplish that task.

Guy hit the ground running...or, more precisely, driving (If I was going to rob a bank, I’d want Guy

behind the wheel.), and I was lucky enough to get on at the first stop. During the late 50s and for much of the 60s we (and a few other misguided youth) roared around California and Arizona, gently wringing-out habitats, desperate to know what birds lived where, when they arrived and departed, where were the secret places to find space and local kinds...and drawing the blueprints on how to seek the rare.

It was fun, too. There were endless conversations on bird-related topics during all-night drives to tomorrow’s birding destination, there were outrageous adventures along *The Road* and there was the thrill of pioneering many areas that would become routine stops to thousands of birders a decade later.

For many, Guy changed California’s avian pursuit from one of passive field-tripping to one of active field ornithology and that influence spread throughout North America.

JON L. DUNN

Author, Ornithological Editorial Consultant, Tour Leader

As an impressionable and arguably precocious young teenager birder in 1967, I first became aware of Guy McCaskie through his columns in *Aububon Field Notes*. I was amazed that in a single season he found literally a score or more species that were considered accidental in Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds*. I met and birded with him that fall and found him, as did many others, gruff and intimidating (To be fair, Guy has softened considerably through the years.), but it was intoxicating to be in the field with him. Seeing numbers of rarities was reward enough by itself but there was a zeal and enthusiasm to Guy's birding that formed a permanent impression.

Throughout much of the '70s we birded together a great deal, thoroughly exploring California, especially the southern part of the state. We almost never left the state. In fact from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s Guy almost never left California apart from an annual summer trip to southeast Arizona. While he has traveled somewhat more in recent years he still has not visited over 3/4 of the states.

Probably more than any other birder in the United States, Guy can be credited with the ability to know where and when to look for vagrants and he knew what to look for when he found them. He found many localities that harbored vagrants, especially on the coastal headlands and at remote desert oases. Subsequent work has really shown that much of the West is full of vagrant traps. Guy was famous for his visual not auditory skills, his hearing impairment the result of a youthful ear infection. Yet I shall never forget that it was Guy, not I, that recognized solely by call California's first Sprague's Pipit in October 1974, in the Tijuana River Valley.

In the early years, Guy documented the occurrence of Vagrants with voucher specimens, but through the years this practice has been replaced by taking detailed field notes. Guy is still proud of the fact that he has not taken a single photo of a bird.

In 1970, Guy, Pierre Devillers, Alan Craig, Laurie Binford and others created *California Birds* (name later changed to *Western Birds*), a well respected journal covering subjects of ornithological interest in California and elsewhere in the West. Also in that year Guy and others created the California Bird Records Committee. It was designed primarily to evaluate sight records of vagrants. For much of the period since the mid-1970s I have served with him on this body. Our views on various issues and policies have differed, sometimes sharply. Still, Guy has evolved into a strong supporter of the committee process. Many other state and provincial rarities committees have been formed along the guidelines of the California Committee.

I often find it ironic that since leaving Great Britain in 1957, Guy has never returned to that part of the world, yet he is an avid reader of *British Birds*, *Birding World*, and *Dutch Birding*, journals that cover primarily the Western Palearctic. Guy's accent became thoroughly Americanized by the time I met him. It is often a surprise to visiting British birders that Guy was one of them.

Despite growing older, Guy is just as active as he was 30 years ago driving all over the state at all hours and from what I can detect none of his enthusiasm for birding has diminished. Gradually our trips have become fewer, particularly now that I have moved out of state, but the few times we still do share, invariably are some of my most enjoyable times spent afield.

this stuff into the museum. I listened to that advice and I did bring the stuff in. So I walked out there into the field and I thought, "Well, I'll take one of the streaky ones and one of those with a red throat." I was confident in my own mind they were Red-throated Pipits. I did this one morning before classes. I had to go into class at San Diego State and I was not very fair to the birdman at the museum, I must admit, because I handed him this streaky pipit and said, "I've got to run."

When I got back from class he said,

"I can't figure it out. I keep coming up with Sprague's Pipit, but it doesn't match the specimen." And I said, "well, I think it's a Red-throated Pipit from Siberia and I don't think it's in your book." At that point he agreed they were Red-throated Pipits. The year that I found Red-throated Pipit was 1964, I took those two birds from a group of 15. I've often looked back at that and thought, you know, I was down here by myself, looking at these things without knowing all the good spots at that point and without any help, and I used to see a lot of good

warblers. Nowadays with 100 people looking in 100 different spots, I'm not sure that we get the quantity of some of those Eastern warblers that maybe we would have back in those '60s days. I look back and wonder. As one observer going out there and looking. It can never be repeated again because you can never get back to that situation again."

With hardly a change in sound or attitude he pauses in mid-monologue, with a little bark of laughter, informally darting from subject to subject,

interrupting himself at times to comment on newly-noticed or just thought of notions. More than anything he seems to like to laugh and most of the time he finds plenty to laugh about. Did he have a sense back then that he was changing people's perspective on how to bird?

“Looking back at it, I realized it was happening. But I was having too much fun — far too much fun — to think about it much. I truly was. I thought this whole adventure was great. I remember very early on a friend went on a field trip with Rich and I. Her comments to me, I remember very well. There were these two mad kids that went out and saw all these fancy birds, she'd just only dreamt of. And this was just unreal. So she decided, “well, maybe I'll leave this clutter of very conservative people and see what these two mad kids really are seeing.” She joined Rich and myself. “Oh, for goodness sake,” we were really seeing what we said we saw! She thought that was much more fun. It just ruined her birding forever. She could never go back to

the old style. She said, it just totally changed her whole style of birding. She was one of the earlier ones who stepped across the line and found this was much more fun than the way it used to be. And I think that once people stepped across the line they never were able to go back to the old way.”

It must be recognized that observations and their observers are never as independent as the rules of scientific investigation seem to demand. Each appears differently in every eye that observes it. Guy hitched his wagon to his own ozone starship. He has a special viewpoint and special interest but most of all, he has a genius for the observation of certain types of events. At these he is nonpareil.

“Some of the things that I thought were first state records, it turned out weren't. It was like finding a first state record and then later on thinking, well, it wasn't, it was a second. But, in terms of a perception to the California birders, the Blackpoll Warbler was unknown in a sense. I was unknown and it was also unknown. A lot of

these things were unknown west of the Rockies. It was a huge chunk of space. I know my first Prairie Warblers and Blackburnian Warblers and things like that were literally the first ones in the entire West, as far as I could tell. And I was not prepared for that.

The other funny thing that came about was you had no idea what was good, really good, and what wasn't. They were all new. So I would find a Blackpoll and think that's great, tremendous. And then I'd find a Blue-winged Warbler and I'd say, “that's great, that's tremendous.” Looking back at it now, a Blue-winged was in a class totally different than the Blackpoll. But to me they were certainly equal. And Connecticut Warbler, and Clay-colored Sparrow, and Dickcissel. They were all new to me, they were all very new to California and they were all obviously way west of where anybody had ever concluded they were.

Actually the first Blackpoll I ever found, believe it or not, was no where near the Tijuana River Valley. When I was up at Tahoe and I found this place called Honey Lake. I found

RICHARD WEBSTER

Attorney, Photographer, Writer for American Birds and Birding

Birding should be fun and exciting, and that is what Guy has shared with anyone who is willing. What Guy brought me was the excitement of wondering what's around the corner, and what will be there tomorrow and next day and next year and next decade. Beyond the fun of looking and finding, there is the satisfaction of learning from comparing well-kept field notes.

The excitement of finding what is out there is something Guy still has. I drag myself to the 3 a.m. meeting point for the drive to the Salton Sea and find myself in the presence of a bright-eyed McCaskie, raring to make what may be his 400th early morning foray to brave the heat, mud, and rotting fish. Perhaps he will find his ninth species of tubenose for the Salton Sea. Perhaps he won't. Either way he will enjoy it, and be back next weekend, if he isn't searching tamarisk trees at Furnace Creek, finding another Pine Warbler at “Guy's Place” in the Tijuana River

Valley, or trying to ignore seasickness on a boat.

“Trickle-down” has rightfully been discredited as a primary economic policy, but the trickle-down effect is ultimately what will be Guy's greatest contribution, greater than the three decades of field notes full of fabulous sightings or his teaching of his friends. Rather, it is the friends of friends, and on through the growing birder network, that have benefited from Guy's injection of scientific caution, the fun of exploration, and benefits of record keeping. Guy didn't invent birding; instead, he transported and developed what he'd learned, and greatly hastened the development of the potential of birding and birdwatchers.

Through his *American Birds* reports and rarity committee work Guy has inevitably alienated a few and irritated everyone at some point. But one of the traits I most admire is his ability to divorce his judgment of records from his personal regard for the individual. Guy admires and respects good birders, but what he likes most are people who enjoy themselves in finding out what is at the next oasis.

ROBERT O. PAXTON

Author, *American Birds* Regional Editor for the Hudson-Delaware Region

When we first began hearing about Guy McCaskie in the San Francisco Bay area in the early 1960s, what we heard was completely off the scale of normal birding. There were good birders in California then, and they turned up something special once in a while. But McCaskie seemed to be adding new species to the California list every month. And there was never any doubt about them: in those early days, his new state records were usually based on specimens.

How did he do it? I think there were four qualities that McCaskie developed to Olympic levels in his early field days. First, he knew an enormous amount about what the common birds should look like, and what the likely rarities looked like. Second, he checked out every bird in detail. Not just a casual glance, but all the key feather tracts and soft parts of every bird he saw got a close look. Third, he had an uncanny sense for vagrant traps and he checked those places far more closely than anyone else ever had. Finally, he never seemed to rest. I don't know whether the stories were true about McCaskie getting off work in San Diego late on a Friday and then taking off for Eureka with a loaf of bread in the seat beside him in case he felt hungry, but I know he crisscrossed the state every weekend. Sometimes he made you suspect that he just lucked on to rare birds in some mysterious way, but I am sure McCaskie's phenomenal success was based on very high levels of knowledge, skill, attention, and drive. The effect on young birders was electric, and soon a lot of them were developing the same intensity of field skills. Birding in California ceased to be a low-key pastime; it was never the same again after McCaskie.

there were lots of warblers in the trees up there. I'd go up there and start looking at all these warblers that were there in the fall. I saw a warbler that, from what I remembered from the field guide was either a Blackpoll or a Bay-breasted and I looked very carefully at its legs and its feet because in those days that was the way you told them apart. And it had nice pink legs and feet and I got home and looked in my field guide. I didn't have a question it was a Blackpoll Warbler. The following fall I was in the Tijuana River Valley and I found loads of Blackpoll Warblers."

Leadership isn't just a career goal for McCaskie, it's what he's all about. In the history of North American birding there isn't a better example of someone who has made breakthroughs and by his example, inspired entire communities to make them also. In

1963, he became regional editor of the Southern Pacific Coast Region, first in *Audubon Field Notes* and, since 1970, *American Birds*. The report that appears in this issue is his 112th, the previous consecutive 105 of those representing single-author efforts. From 1973 through 1989, he served as Christmas Bird Count editor for California and in those years authored 16 cogent, highly-structured, and polished reports.

Writing the regional reports gave him access to a wider realm of public attention than his freewheeling birding exploits prior to that had. He immediately brought to his accounts more and better background understanding against which to evaluate records. He has always written with sure strokes and those nearly 30 years of reports merit careful reading. There is much more in them than may be picked up on the quick skim that their fluent style permits. A skillful

popularizer, he has introduced his insights to a broad readership and induced many to follow in his footsteps. He, like some sort of intellectual praying mantis, writes with the unassailable security of a man who has experienced his subject first-hand. His discoveries become our discoveries.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to his exemplary columns in *American Birds* and its predecessor, *Audubon Field Notes*, Guy documented his carefully honed field notes and observations in some of the country's most prestigious national and regional bird publications: *The Auk*, *Condor*, *California Birds* and its successor *Western Birds*, and *Birding*.

Guy's effect on birding has extended far beyond the range of personal contact. Those whom he has directly and indirectly influenced are spread around the country and have achieved or are now achieving recognition in their own right. He planted the germ of the idea to start a bird observatory on the west coast, which became a reality with the founding of Point Reyes Bird Observatory in 1965. He was indirectly responsible for establishing a research station on the Farallon Islands. In 1970, as one of the founders of the Western Field Ornithologists, he was instrumental in the creation of the publication first called *California Birds* and, in 1973, changed to *Western Birds*. Because he believes that the stages of scientific advance are observation and description, one can see more clearly the role that he has played in the flow of events toward the point at which birding exists today. He played a pivotal role in the formulation of the California Bird Records Committee in 1970. The charge of this committee is to review all records of species unusual within the state, and this body is the final authority on the acceptability of records. Certainly his ideas and his influence are closely intertwined and the present list bears evidence of his approach — empirical and practical.

From the early sixties through the early nineties, Guy has been at the forefront of the serious study of pelagic birds. On countless cruises out of Monterey or Mission Bays, sometimes headed as far as Davidson and Pioneer Seamounts (some 70 miles offshore), he could be found tenaciously at the bow on the rail, when no one could get out of a seat without being flung the length of the boat. Seasick? Sometimes, but flagrantly hardy and always determined to handle whatever comes along with good humor, patience, and a deep sense of camaraderie.

“Well, obviously right now there’s a great deal of interest in the waters very far offshore. It’s becoming more and more open to us as there are more and more boats and people with enough enthusiasm to go and do it. That’s one area where I see more exploration in the future.”

Because the central tool of science is measurement, the scientist is numerate just as the poet is literate. Apart from all of the projects nearing completion, Guy sees that a tremendous amount of measurement and descriptive work remains to be done in areas that have yet to be studied in detail. As for the future.

“There’s atlasing to zero in on, especially some of the missing blocks. And I think that big pushes out in the desert are probably going to decline as more and more people bird their own little patch rather than going great distances. Compared to ten years ago, I think the novelty of it has worn off. The way it seems to be now is that everybody does his little patch, covers it very thoroughly and when there’s something really good, then you go over to see it. As an added thing you will leave your patch and go look at the real fancy things. But going to join somebody just to bird their patch, doesn’t seem to be as prevalent today as it was ten years

ago. So I think you’re going to see a lot more very intense and continuous observations within small areas. That type of birding is going to be more and more common. We’re going to see a lot of very detailed-type information from small areas. That’s the trend I’m seeing.”

McCaskie’s own accounts are resolutely descriptive. What will Guy himself be concentrating on in the near future? His eyes brighten with the prospect of all he still wants to do and now it’s his smile that you notice. There’s plenty left to do; adventurous opportunities still abound, and he has the imagination and resourcefulness to seek them out.

“I consider the Salton Sea one of my regular patches and I will continue concentrating on it because it’s one of the exciting patches that I cover. It basically came as a natural. It was an interesting area and, as in most cases, the first trip was a big influence and spurred me to come back. All you have to do is hit a couple of really good birds and you’re hooked. That certainly is what happened at the Salton Sea. I hope to be able to do something very comprehensive on the Salton Sea because I’ve replicated the same route every time that I cover it. I may not cover the entire Salton Sea, but my spot checks are essentially the same for close to 20 years at this point.

I think there’s a lot of pleasure to be got out of publishing and letting the information that you’ve learned get out there where everybody can look at it. I hope whatever I write will be the first comprehensive study for that spot. I haven’t got a deadline for that. But the intent is there.”

In a sense, his life has been strung together by a series of great birds, deep friendships, laughter, successes, and opportunities taken and opportunities created. He is one of those rare few who, by taking some existing ideas and methods and dismissing others, can so enlarge them and enhance their value that what was previously a side road becomes a wide boulevard. To his friends, McCaskie is the subject of deep affection and wry exasperation. No one can see him objectively. Most of his recent past is legendary. He has a slew of assets in his favor and a few fissures in his nature. He is one of the most original, colorful, insightful, and influential people in the field of modern day birding. He has always done and continues to do those things which he considers the greatest fun. Above all, and in essence, he has taught very many to look at avian events with the eyes of a discoverer. He’s made countless people aware that the sheer joy of discovery is sufficient justification for spending decades as an unparalleled mentor.

ARNOLD SMALL
Author, Lecturer

Scotsman R. Guy McCaskie arrived in California in the mid-1950s and forever changed the quality of birding and our knowledge of the status and distribution of western birds. Guy applied field skills and techniques he’d learned in Great Britain to the shores, fields, and forests of California. Quickly he was finding birds previously unknown in the state. He acquired the knowledge necessary to recognize the subtle marks that distinguish “vagrants” from expected migrants. And, he pioneered the concept of locating coastal and desert “vagrant traps.” He generously shared his knowledge and information with others. Soon a new “generation” of birders emerged which forever changed the complexion of field ornithology. Because of his influence the state bird list has risen from 450+ in the mid-1950s to 580+ at present.