

## It Started in a Van—A Reminiscence of the Early FOS

By James A. Kushlan

Graduate school field trips are always memorable, memories that changeably mature as time passes. Fifty years ago our major professor, Oscar T. Owre, packed his pre-fledglings off to what became the first Florida Ornithological Society meeting. We crowded into his University of Miami VW van, prosaically named 613. It was to be my second bird meeting, as he had done the same thing the year before hauling us off to Dauphin Island, Alabama, for a Wilson Club meeting, where I gave my first - of far too many - research talks. But this was different; the Wilson Ornithological Society was scary, an unfathomably ancient organization at 52 years old. But, this was new. Florida was ready for its own ornithological society. After all, we were favored by having the cream of American ornithological science and politics in Florida. Oliver Austin was dean, or perhaps general. But there also were Pierce Brodtkorb, Herb Kale, Robert Loftin, Bud Owre, Henry Stevenson, Glenn Woolfenden, and Bill Robertson, who was always a gray eminence even before turning gray and was the universal draftee as first president, a draft being essential to achieve his acceptance. He approached such recognitions, as he once said, "it is like being tarred and feathered, except for the honor I'd rather not be here." There were more of Florida's ornithological community during those decades, such as Robert Crawford, Bill Hardy, David Johnston, Walter Taylor, Lovett Williams, and for too short a time after the meeting ornithological publicist par excellence Allen Cruikshank. Helen Cruikshank continued their involvement. And there were fellow youngsters about in this era, such as Fred Lohrer, Steve Nesbitt, Rich Paul, and Ralph Schreiber. Many a mark was made on American ornithology by the early FOSers - future American Ornithologists' Union, Cooper Society, and of course FOS presidents among them.

Distinctly and very purposely, FOS was not to be only for those drawing a salary or pension from birds. It was to be equally open for the rest of the bird-appreciating public. Likely 90% of the initial attendees were "amateurs," a categorization that distinguished them, not with unkindness, in the professionals' eyes. It was, after all, still a time when coat-and-ties were worn at the AOU, which limited its number of fellows to those countable on a few hands and having suitable academic breeding. In fact, the bulk of attendees would have called themselves bird-watchers then; but, really, they ran the board of birders, conservationists, Audubonites, and dedicated naturalists of all stripes. And they were, using one of Bud Owre's favorite words, a *gemütlich* group. Henry Stevenson made sure we knew how we all could be part of the science of birds by

participating in organized counts, fully documenting rarities, and publishing observations - an early exposition on what evolved into citizen science and Cornell's enabling apps. But back then, we needed it on paper. And Henry needed it for his life's work documenting Florida's birdlife, which became his incomparable magnum opus.



How many people can you identify in this photo?

So a journal was among FOS' initial imperatives, and its first volume emerged quickly the next year. Contributions from all - not just the "professionals" - were welcomed from the very beginning. The name Florida Field Naturalist was chosen with careful thought and historical connectivity. The name played off Florida Naturalist, the venerable organ of the Florida Audubon Society, which was nurturing its ornithological fledgling. And off its Field Notes section, which had enabled little bird notes to be published. I had some of my first mini papers published in that section, like a record of a Rusty Blackbird in south Florida - for which I received huge accolades for my field discernment. Truth be told, Bud Owre was from the old school of museum ornithology, which was in part conducted with a gun; and he sent his graduate students out armed to collect specimens. I had fired blindly into a blackbird flock producing the specimen that erroneously confirmed that I was a crack birder. Having been inculcated in the importance of publication, the first FFN volumes included two of my articles, extraneous notes from my thesis studies. FFN was indeed a welcome enterprise to young ornithologists.

I had the opportunity to pay back the leg-up provided youthful publication when I followed the incomparably knowledgeable Fred Lohrer as editor of the *Florida Field Naturalist* in the 1980s. It was old school editing; and, wishing to know how to do it right, I asked for an interview with long-time Auk editor Oliver Austin, which he granted. He was exceptionally kind in showing me how help out authors, how to organize a page, and how to edit - I recall well his rule that the final edit it was to be a “which” hunt so as to ferret out offending which’s that should be that’s. I still do. He gave me a metal ruler, a generational baton passed, that translated font type to page inches. And this was real; the journal was assembled by literally cutting a long banner of text and taping the bits together on the floor, a process continued with our same publisher when I later edited the *Colonial Waterbirds* journal. Formatting - it’s just too simple now.

As editor, I was an obligatory attendee at the semi-annual meetings, mostly to flog the journal and recruit submissions. Field trip attendance was expected, and I dutifully complied. As journal editor and rusty blackbird spotter, I also was expected - at 7 in the morning - to identify for fellow field-trippers a faint patch of color within a nearby bush. Turns out I’m a fair ornithologist but not so superior a birder. So I developed alternative skills, such as delaying with “where exactly?” noting “sorry it seems to have flown,” or asking “what do you think it is?” But we usually filled up the journal with interesting observations. I recall well how Lawrence Kilham, a microbiology professor in retirement in Florida, always had an article ready on crow behavior, each of which was wonderful. He knew his crows well. The journal pieced

together bits of our evolving Florida bird list, one article and observation at a time, and provided space for keen notes on bird behavior, as well as on herps and mammals, as the journal never was intended only to be about birds. Such bird notes saw their fruition in Bill Robertson and Glenn Woolfenden’s seminal *Florida Bird Species* as an FOS special publication, recently updated by Jon Greenlaw, Bill Pranty, and Reed Bowman.

It’s a bit odd, of course, to look back on how a van trip led to a memorable charter participant in a new society. It certainly proves how buying an early career life-membership is quite a deal. At some points sharing a “look back” is not without some value, perhaps mostly for those whose responsibility is now to look ahead. In the past few years I’ve had the opportunity to write about the history of Florida’s nature in several books on the history of Florida’s national parks and another on its early naturalists, in each of which birds played an outsized role. The science and conservation of Florida’s environment have always been about its birds.

Jim Kushlan is former professor, director of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, and president of the AOU and Waterbird Society. His most recent books are *Everglades National Park* and *Seeking the American Tropics, South Florida’s Early Naturalists*. Find out more at [JamesAKushlan.com](http://JamesAKushlan.com).

## Florida Keys Hawkwatch Primer

by Peter Monte

The Florida Keys Hawkwatch (FKH), the southernmost migration monitoring project in the continental United States, systematically tracks fall movements of all avian species with a focus on diurnal birds of prey. The all-volunteer operation is part of a history of raptor monitoring in the middle keys dating back to 1989. In the next Snail Kite Newsletter, due out May 2022, learn about the conservation and ecological significance of the ongoing work by FKH.



The Florida Keys Hawkwatch - 2021 official full-time count team pose comfortably (barefoot) at the site’s observation deck. Pictured left to right: Luis Eduardo Gles, Mariah Hryniewich, and Brian Cammarano. Photo taken September 15, 2021.