

**QUESTIONS FOR MARGERY NICOLSON: BIRDER, ENVIRONMENTALIST, AND FRIEND OF AUDUBON CALIFORNIA**

**Q: How did you first become involved with Audubon?**

**A:** My husband and I were members of virtually every environmental organization from the 60s and 70s forward, including Audubon, but one couldn't exactly call that "involved." It was just "hedging our bets" because we were deeply interested in conservation and environmental issues. Our active involvement began when, in 1989, we established a charitable remainder unitrust, and chose Audubon as the remainderman because we thought they presented the best program. A whole series of events followed. We were invited to Nebraska to view the magic of the Sandhill crane migration, and, of course, got hooked into returning every year for the event. It was there that we met Stan Senner, Audubon Alaska's Executive Director, and were invited to join a boat trip to southeast Alaska. That trip gave us our first close-up view of the Tongass National Forest and what "old growth" really means. I guess it was all down-hill from there, as we became friends with many Audubon members and staff, and gradually, Audubon became our primary environmental organization as donors, and through our shared interests in the natural world.

**Q: You are currently a volunteer for Audubon Alaska, California and Nebraska, three distinct state programs, and you serve on the National Audubon Society board. How did you become involved with these states?**

**A:** I am currently serving on the NAS Board, and on the Alaska and California Boards. But I get my "hands-on" work every year in March, as a volunteer at the Rowe Sanctuary for Nebraska Audubon. And I do mean "hands-on," from leading trips to the blinds to sweeping the floors and doing other menial tasks with my jolly band of retiree volunteers. How did all this happen? My beloved Scots husband, Iain, died in 2001, and I guess my Audubon friends thought that they could help fill in the hole that he left. So, in short order, I was invited to join the National Board, the Alaska Board, and to become a volunteer at Rowe Sanctuary, all of which I, perhaps foolishly, accepted. My most recent appointment was to the California Board, which encourages me to get involved in the many environmental issues of the state in which I live.

**Q: What do you think are the three biggest challenges facing Audubon California?**

**A:** Obviously, the biggest challenge for Audubon California is the size of the state and 37 million people with diverse backgrounds and interests. How to reach even a small portion of these is an exercise in communication of giant proportions. One cannot easily dissect out the three major challenges facing our organization in California because they are all interrelated. Public visibility of Audubon as an environmental organization is a major challenge and closely related to communication issues, as well as to funding concerns. A second major challenge is the mobilization of 51 chapters, centers and state office to coordinate an agreed-upon set of conservation and education goals. This requires input from all entities, and again is related to communication issues. The third major challenge is development of a solid financial base, building an increasing amount into endowment, the income from which should be able to partially fund the yearly state budget.

**Q: How do you think Audubon should meet those challenges?**

**A:** Meeting these challenges is not easy, and will not happen instantly. The visibility question can be addressed in several ways: education through centers and chapters, publicized public functions and publicity through the internet, newspapers, periodicals; outreach through programs such as *Audubon At Home*; promoting *Audubon*

*Adventures* in the schools; and becoming a louder voice in shaping public policy. We should become a little less moderate, and a little more aggressive in our public stance.

The second challenge—development of conservation and education goals—can only be achieved if all the organization's stakeholders have input into the planning and decision-making process, and in the end, can take "ownership" of the projects each is involved in. We need to communicate on a regular basis between chapters, centers, and state office to keep all entities informed as part of a larger network. A frequent newsletter should feature progress of several specific projects in each issue. Regular meetings of chapter representatives, centers and state staff are important, and the state office should be prepared to [take the lead on] such meetings.

The third challenge—building a financial base—is again related to Audubon's public visibility and public image. If we are viewed as an important environmental organization working to protect habitat and wildlife, funding is more likely than if we are viewed as a bunch of people who like to look at birds! As we focus in on our strategic plan and on specific projects, major donors will have a better view of where their contributions are being useful. The bottom line, however, is that we need more development staff in order to raise more funds, which brings us back to the need to fund additional staff.

**Q: What would you like to accomplish during your tenure on the Audubon California board?**

**A:** I would like the *Audubon At Home* program to become viable, to be embraced by all the chapters and centers, and to be the centerpiece of community outreach throughout California. This entails developing materials for both those who will teach, and those who will be taught. It also mandates that chapters and centers will be the mechanism by which this program is disseminated, and that they will develop the leadership skills to present the program. It would also be important to partner with other groups for a wider distribution of the information and impact on conservation. As a board member, I have a great opportunity to learn more about birds, conservation and the environment from my fellow board members, and thereby become a more useful board member myself.

**Q: How did you first get interested in birds?**

**A:** My late husband, Iain, was my guide and mentor. He brought a knowledge of birds and the natural world to our marriage, and that became the basis of most of our recreational activities. I was hooked the first day I managed to identify a green-tailed towhee. At first, we spent weekends happily back-packing in the Sierra Nevada, identifying birds and plants. Later we moved further afield to view the wonderful birds in Australia, the exotic ones in Nepal, the Galapagos, Ecuador, Kamchatka and the Antarctic. So many birds, so little time!

**Q: What is the greatest birding experience that you have had?**

**A:** Well, apart from the green-tailed towhee, three birding experiences stand out in my mind. There was the time in Australia when we spent several hours searching for a Fairy wren, a tiny little bright blue bird. I left Iain sitting on a bench in a little clearing while I walked up the hill. As I left, I said that I supposed upon my return he would say that he had seen the wren in question. "Oh no," he said, "I wouldn't do a thing like that." I returned and sat down beside him. After a moment of silence, he said "You're not going to believe this," to which I replied, "Probably not," "Well," he said, "I saw a Fairy wren." And almost as he spoke, three pairs of these tiny little jewels came hopping out from the bushes and started pecking around in the dust. And I was so excited that I forgot to photograph them. There was also the time in Nepal when we had climbed arduously up to the top of a small peak at about 21,000 feet. And as we lay panting against our packs, we looked up to see a huge bird circling at least a thousand feet above us - a lammergeier, or bearded vulture with a wingspan said to be nine feet. A truly impressive sight, especially at that altitude. And on our trip to Kamchatka, we went by small boat one day up a river (whose name I have forgotten) and high in the trees lining this river, we saw two huge nests, each of which contained a young Stellar's Sea Eagle. And as we continued to look, we saw the adult eagles, who had been keeping watch in

the trees, take flight and begin to circle around. Amazing sight, these huge black and white birds, which slightly resemble a bald eagle. That time I did remember to photograph!

**Q: What other activities pique your interest?**

**A:** Hiking and back-packing are perennial favorites, although now not the latter. Skiing is a sport I love, now only cross-country. Travel to undeveloped areas, or travel in general. Classical music is a constant (listening, not playing anymore), art-collecting and gardening claim some of my time. And looking after a very high-maintenance cat is definitely an activity!