

# News Roundup

Recent events in the bird world

## Alexander Skutch, 1904–2004

Dr. Alexander F. Skutch, one of the great Neotropical field ornithologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, died at his home in Costa Rica on 12 May, just a week before a planned 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. Perhaps best known among ABA birders as the author (with Gary Stiles and the artist Dana Gardner) of *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*, Dr. Skutch was a prolific author, responsible for more than thirty books and the definitive natural histories of hundreds of Central American bird species during his long career. Dr. Skutch had survived his wife, Pamela, who died in 2001.

A native of Baltimore, Maryland, Dr. Skutch traveled to Panama as a field researcher for the United Fruit Company in 1928, equipped with a fresh Ph.D. in Botany. He rapidly cultivated an interest in birds, first inspired by the sight of nest-building hummingbird outside the window of his laboratory. By 1935, he had settled in the valley near San Isidro de El General, Costa Rica, where he was to spend the rest of his life. In 1941, he purchased the 76-hectare property that became his home and private preserve, Los Cusingos.

Neither a taxonomist nor a biochemist, Dr. Skutch based his work on that most fundamental birding skill: careful observation of birds in their natural habitats. He had little interest in collecting or even banding birds; instead, he painstakingly unraveled the subtleties of the behavior and ecological relationships of his subjects. His writing, simple, lucid, and precise, invariably conveys the sheer fascination with wildlife that was Dr. Skutch's hallmark.

A dated but delightful interview with Dr. Skutch can be read on the web at <[www.angelfire.com/bc/gonebirding/skutch.html](http://www.angelfire.com/bc/gonebirding/skutch.html)>. The Pamela and Alexander F. Skutch Fund of the Association of Field Ornithologists was established by Dr. Skutch to provide grants to study little-known birds in the Neotropics. Birders interested in honoring Dr. Skutch with a donation to this fund should contact Elissa M. Landre, chair of the fund's committee, care of Massachusetts Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary, 280 Eliot St. Natick, MA 01760.

## Caution on Birding Ethics

Ft. Rosencrans National Cemetery on Point Loma, San Diego, California, is a popular birding site featured in the ABA's *Birder's Guide to Southern California*. But a shift in policy under a new director has made the future of birding in the cemetery uncertain.

At issue is the decorum of carrying on a recreational activity like birding at a site of remembrance. As of our mid-June deadline, it appeared that constructive dialog was going between birders and cemetery management, and birding remained permissible. But local birders emphasize that anyone birding in the cemetery should exhibit the

utmost respect for their surroundings.

Sound advice came from San Diego birder Mike Evans, posting to CALBIRDS: "Visitors who watch birds at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery should remember that the cemetery is a shrine to the honored dead of the Armed Forces of the United States and should respect the primary use of this historic area."

"It's extremely important that birders visiting the cemetery follow posted cemetery rules (e.g., parking outside, staying away from groups of mourners and the like)", emphasized Brad Schram, author of *A Birder's Guide to Southern California*. "Good deportment and common-sense respect for those in the cemetery following the purpose of such a place will ensure that this fine birding location will not be closed to us."

## Really Birding by Ear

The 2004 Great Texas Birding Classic, held along the Lone Star State's lengthy coast this past April 17-25, introduced a unique twist to an annual event that already ranks among the top birding competitions worldwide: a new division, the Outta-Sight Song Bird Tournament, for blind or visually impaired birders.

Blind birders from the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) squared off on three teams, assisted by a blindfolded, sighted birder, in what appears to be the first event of its kind. The idea may have been inspired by the World Birding Center's new Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, where a bird call exhibit with Braille text invites visitors who can't see birds to listen to them. A group of visually impaired RGV residents, already working together to improve their lives and explore their potential, wanted to learn more. Supported by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department grants totaling \$66,000 and administered through the nonprofit Rensselaerville Institute, the group began learning bird sounds last fall. Ultimately, twelve members of this group approached Birding Classic staff about creating a new competition category.

"We don't want to have people feel sorry for us", said Gladie Cruz of Edinburg, one of the event's participants. "We want to be out there, independent, doing different stuff, learning things like birding". Why not? Birds themselves communicate extensively with sounds, and most skilled birders hear many more birds than they see. Moreover, bird songs surely rank among the world's most beautiful sounds.

The Outta-Sight tournament was won by the España Tweety Birds, who tallied 40 species. But of course the importance of such an event goes far beyond the day's score. Birding, the Outta-Sight tournament shows, truly does offer something for everyone. And no obstacle can stand up to spirit, teamwork, and imagination. *Winging It* hopes the Outta-Sight competition flourishes in for years to come.