

# How Birding Took Flight

by Angela Baerg, '06

The thrill of the hunt, the joy of discovery, and the beauty of God's nature blend together in the popular pastime of birdwatching. One of the fastest-growing hobbies in North America, birding wouldn't be what it is today without the influence of several Southern alumni.

Back in the 1960s, students Jim Tucker, '62, Nat Halverson, '63, and Benton Basham, '66, worked alongside each other in the broom factory on Southern's campus. They were paid by the piece, not by the hour, and over time they developed a friendly rivalry to see who could be the most productive. Then one day something happened that gave their competitive spirit a new focus.

A flock of birds landed outside the window, and Basham eyed them through his binoculars.

"See those birds?" he murmured thoughtfully. "What are they?"

"I don't know," Halverson shrugged. "Some kind of sparrow, I guess."

"Just look!" Basham pushed the binoculars into his hands.

Halverson peered through them, first reluctantly and then with increasing interest. The birds' were a beautiful gradient of color, ranging from reddish-brown at the head to a purplish-blue with a bright yellow band at the tail.

"They were the most remarkably dressed birds I'd ever seen," Halverson remembers 40 years later. "Those Cedar Waxwings were my first sighting. After that, I was hooked."

## Birdwatching Breaks

From then on, breaks at the broom factory became birdwatching bonanzas. The three students would dash off to the woods along the nearby creek to see who could spot the most birds before their agreed-upon time was up. As the son of two birdwatchers, Tucker's first childhood memory was of watching a White-breasted Nuthatch on a birdfeeder. He was thrilled to find two new friends who shared his interest. The three friends' love of the game pushed them to improve their

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

*Matthew 6:26*

skills, and soon they were good enough to recognize the birds around them just by their calls. Tucker, Halverson, and Basham became deeply involved with the Chattanooga Chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, making friends from all over the area. Several times a year, the members would divide the county into various sectors, split off into groups, and birdwatch all day. Then in the evening they would regroup for what they

called "the countdown" to list the birds they had observed and, for fun, determine who had spotted the most.

After the three friends graduated from Southern, they went their separate ways. Basham pursued further education and became a nurse anesthetist, and Halverson and Tucker went on to teach in the Seventh-day Adventist school system.

But there was one thing they never left behind: their insatiable, contagious love of birdwatching. Through their passion and dedication, each would help to mold the birding world as we know it today.

## Inspiring Young Bird Lovers

The broom factory was not just a job for Halverson; it was also where he met his wife, Margaret (Richardson) Halverson, '70. In Margaret, he found not only an amazing life partner but also a fellow bird lover. She assisted her husband as he became deeply involved in many scientific bird-banding research projects that involved catching birds, marking them with an identifying band around the leg, and then releasing them to be tracked in the future. The Halversons spent many years teaching at Standifer Gap Seventh-day Adventist School and integrated their avian knowledge into the curriculum there. They gave their students the opportunity to have tactile involvement with bird banding, an experience that resonated with many, including Carl Swafford, '75, now dean of Graduate Studies at Southern, who never thought he would be interested in birds.

"I loved bird banding because I could hold the bird in my hand," Swafford remembers. "We tagged birds and tracked their travels throughout the seasons. Many of them were

This beautiful image of a female Osprey defending her nest was captured by Southern business professor and photographer Braam Oberholster at the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge near Birchwood, Tennessee. You can see more of his wildlife images at [momentsofprovidence.com](http://momentsofprovidence.com).

## Inspiring The Next Generation

Edgar Grundset became a birthing icon at Southern. As a biology professor, he spread his passion for nature and birthing to his students for nearly 40 years. Through his ornithology class and spring break birthing trips to Florida (during which students routinely identified at least 150 bird species), many people caught his enthusiasm for the sport. In his honor, Southern hosts the annual E.O. Grundset lecture series.

The love of birthing is still being nurtured at Southern. When David Hollie, '14, arrived on campus to study biology, he already had an interest in birds. However, as a student he spent two summers in the Smoky Mountains doing bird research and discovered that he

wanted birthing to be more than a hobby—he wanted it to be his career.

Since earning his biology degree, Hollie has combined his two favorite things: travel and field research. His work with birds has taken him from

Texas to Australia and many places in between.

This fall Hollie looks forward to starting his graduate research and studying the effect of forest management on breeding birds in the Missouri Ozarks.

"I am continually impressed by the amazing complexity and diversity of birds," Hollie shares. "They are an amazing window into the mind of our Creator."



Hollie nets a male Golden-cheeked Warbler in Texas.

re-trapped in states across the Northeast. One bird, a Chimney Swift, was re-trapped in Peru! Now that was exciting to a 13-year-old boy who loved nature."

Chris Haney, '81, was another Standifer Gap student deeply influenced by his time with the Halversons. In fact, their influence is one reason Haney pursued a career involving birds. During the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, Haney led a survey to document the impact of spilled oil on marine birds. Currently he is the senior adviser of a survey tracking the geography and seasonality of marine birds across the Gulf of Mexico for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management for the Department of the Interior.

"Margaret was so instrumental in combining high expectations with praise," Haney remembers. "She and Nat taught all of us to apply ourselves to the maximum in everything we did."

### Big Days and Even Bigger Years

Although Basham was a nurse anesthetist by day, the rest of the time he was 100 percent birthing. Even after graduation, Basham and Tucker stayed close, spotting birds together when they could and collaborating on what birders call a "Big Day." In a Big Day, one attempts to see as many bird species as possible within a 24-hour period.

Basham, Tucker, and the three other members of their team attempted one Big Day so elaborate that it was profiled by *Sports Illustrated Magazine* in 1979. The day started at 2 a.m. in east Texas at the marshes of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, moving next to the local hardwood and pine forest, and then to Galveston. From there they were whisked off to Rockport by Learjet, where they watched the ducks of Copano Bay and the shorebirds of Mustang Island and Oso Bay. After that, they flew to the Mexican border to see the birds of the Rio Grande Valley. Next they went to the Huachuca Mountains in Arizona before their grand finale in San Diego and Mount Palomar. Their goal was to beat the U.S. record of 231 sightings and perhaps the world record of 288; unfortunately, bad luck left them at 183. Still, they had a thrilling and memorable time trying.

Basham's ambitions didn't end there. In 1998, he set out to break the "Big Year" record. With 711 sightings that year, he became the No. 1 birther in North America. Eventually, with the help of rare-bird Internet blog updates, his record was surpassed. Still, at that time and with the resources Basham had, his achievement was incredible. Even now he remains a hero of the birthing community.

"Dad flew all over the United States and probably went to Gamble, Alaska, six to eight times that year alone," remembers Jeff Basham, '83, his son. "It could be frustrating; you could go all the way out there just to have the bird fly away two minutes before you arrived. I loved having a dad who was a birther. All through my childhood, he would take me out of school once or twice a week. Then we would hop on a plane to go find a bird."



Benton Basham, '66, (left) reunites with Margaret, '70, and Nat Halverson, '63, in 2016.

### The Birth of the American Birthing Association

Tucker always loved fellowshipping with other birthing lovers. For him, shared interest easily overcame age barriers. While at Southern, he was the youngest member of the Chattanooga Chapter of the Ornithological Society and became president at age 21. When he moved to Florida to teach, he joined the Florida Audubon Society and became president of the Orange County chapter. There he continued doing counts with his new friends and also became deeply involved with the movement to save the forests, swamps, prairies, and lakes. The members of the Audubon Society had a wonderful time together but faced a recurring challenge; they could not figure out how to get the youth on board.

In 1968, Tucker moved to Texas to pursue his doctorate.

He missed his buddies back East, so on a whim he put together a little newsletter chronicling the adventures of his birthing friends around the country. He cranked out 12 copies on a ditto machine and mailed them with a letter asking for feedback and suggestions. Not long afterward, he was bowled over by the enthusiastic response he received—both in ideas and names to be added to the mailing list.

"I laughingly called it *Birthing Digest*, Volume 0, Number 0," Tucker recalls. "One of the best suggestions I received was to change the newsletter's name to 'Birthing.' A friend of mine had heard the term used in England, but it hadn't been used in the United States up to that point."

After its debut as the title of the next issue of the newsletter, the term "birthing" rapidly entrenched itself in popular U.S. vernacular. *Birthing* also laid the foundation for what would later become the American Birthing Association (ABA). Its goals were to informally connect passionate birders, to communicate the latest birthing identification techniques, and to establish the rules for listing (a system for logging one's sightings). *Birthing* also included top 10 lists of birders around the world, which inspired

many younger birders to take up the sport and attempt to get their names on the prestigious list. It turned out that the secret all along for getting the younger generation involved was to harness that same friendly, competitive spirit that had initially motivated Tucker, Halverson, and Basham to get out in nature during their broom factory breaks.

Tucker became the ABA's executive director, and Basham helped with marketing as the membership director. Within a few years, they had hundreds of subscribers and held their first national conference. As of 2017, the ABA has more than 13,000 members.

"It really caused an explosion," Tucker says. "It put birthing into the realm of fun for the nation. Not only did it bring people together in a friendly exchange, but it gave people a reason to want to save a swamp or other birthing habitat. In 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service reported that the economic impact of birthing in the United States is now more than \$100 billion annually. It's hard to believe that all of this started with our experiences at Southern and translated into this amazing movement." ■



## Southern Birders

### Jessica Winters Clifford, '00

Clifford's favorite sightings were the Elegant Trogon in Southeast Arizona and the Himalayan Monal, the national bird of Nepal, while she was overseas as a student missionary. She has started taking her two young children on birthing expeditions, as well. In 2016 they visited Argentina, where they saw Magellanic and Gentoos penguins and got to watch them roost.



### Carl Swafford, '75, graduate dean

One of Swafford's favorite expeditions was to the Bering Sea, where he saw Emperor Geese soaring against the backdrop of the Aurora Borealis. Another was his birthing trip to the Yungas Road in Bolivia, the "most dangerous road in the world." In 1981, Swafford and Chris Haney, '81, set the record for a Big Day in Tennessee, sighting 154 bird species in a single day. They held the record for 10 years.

### Cathy Lockwitz, '15

In the 1980s, Lockwitz worked as Basham's executive secretary and had no interest in birds. Over time, however, due to the influence of Basham, his son Jeff, and Haney, she became a serious birther and eventually served as treasurer of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, Chattanooga Chapter, for 12 years. Her favorite sightings include the White-collared Seed-eater, Willow Ptarmigan, Blue-footed Booby, and even one bird that Basham doesn't have on his list—the Red-footed Falcon!

### Jasmin Duany, senior biology major

Taking the ornithology class taught by Keith Snyder, PhD, chair of the Biology Department, was Duany's first exposure to birthing. In the past, most birds looked the same to her; viewing them through binoculars has opened her eyes and helped her learn to distinguish their differences. Her favorite sighting so far has been the Eastern Bluebird.