

La. bird calls

January 04, 2017 8:45 AM Danny Heitman
tulanemag@tulane.edu



Biology professors Tom Sherry and Donata Henry (G '05) marvel at the diversity of birds in Audubon Park in uptown New Orleans. Formerly a student of Sherry's, Henry is now his colleague. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

In the autumn of 1820, John James Audubon left Cincinnati and headed toward Louisiana, following the great southern migration of birds down the Mississippi River flyway. His journey, part of his effort to create a mammoth pictorial survey called *The Birds of America*, acknowledged a central reality. Like any skilled observer of the natural world, Audubon knew that the life of birds is inextricably linked to the presence of water. That idea has informed the careers of Tulane faculty members Tom Sherry and Donata Henry, who were recently recognized for their efforts in conservation by the Louisiana Ornithological Society.

During its April meeting in Cameron, Louisiana, the society presented Sherry with its highest honor, the George H. Lowery Award, for his work studying the ecology and conservation of various migrating birds, including the Swainson's warbler, the American swallow-tailed kite and the American redstart. Henry was one of three recipients of the LOS President's Award for her conservation research, which includes the creation of the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survival (MAPS) station at the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area. The station recruits local residents and students to help with research activities such as bird banding.

YARD BIRD LIST OF 155 SPECIES

For Sherry, acting chair of [Tulane's Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology](#), the connection between Louisiana's varied bird life and its abundant water features is clear. "Besides Louisiana with all its wetlands supporting some of the biggest and most diverse populations of water birds—wading birds, shorebirds, waterfowl, etc.—the Mississippi River is also a major flyway for birds in the fall and spring, probably because it provides such an obvious, conspicuous north-south landscape feature," Sherry said. "We see fantastic migratory bird populations in the fall and spring, anywhere near the river. That's one reason why my yard bird list has so many different species on it."

Sherry has spotted 155 species of birds at the Algiers, Louisiana, home he shares with his wife and fellow scientist, Tracey Werner Sherry, who has taught classes on hummingbirds to high schoolers as part of the Tulane Scholars Program. "My backyard is full of bird feeders, which I keep filled all season except summer," Sherry said. "I have several sunflower seed feeders, which are heavily attended by Carolina chickadees, tufted titmice, downy woodpeckers, cardinals, blue jays, pine warblers and, during winter, by goldfinches, house finches, red-breasted nuthatches, and occasionally pine siskins. However, the big attractions in my yard are the hummingbird plants and hummingbird feeders. My wife—I help—keeps five to 15 feeders going all winter in our yard, and as a result we have lots of hummingbirds all winter, including last winter at least eight buff-bellied hummingbirds, a record for one yard in the winter in Louisiana."

Sherry's interest in birds started early. "My dad had a pair of binoculars—World War II vintage binocs, not ideal for birding, but they worked—and I spent summers in the Adirondack Mountains of northern New York, so I developed an interest in all kinds of natural history, in part to entertain myself," Sherry recalled. "I was interested in snakes, frogs, plants, fishing, all kinds of things as a kid, and I loved the thrill of

discovering new critters. I started paying more attention to birds with the binoculars somewhere around my late junior high or early high school years, and tracked them down to learn their songs and learn how to ID the common ones. A retired high school teacher in White Plains, New York, where I spent most of the year, found out about my interest in birds and nurtured this interest, inviting me to help her catch birds using mist nets in her yard.”

Sherry was hooked, eventually completing two degrees and a post-doc in biology at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and a doctorate in ecology from the University of California–Los Angeles, studying tropical birds, before joining Tulane’s faculty in 1989. He’s published just shy of 100 scholarly journal articles and book chapters on the ecology and conservation of birds. And the young man who embraced ornithology after connecting with a teacher has, in turn, nudged many others to take up studying birds, too.

STUDY FOR A LIFETIME

One student of Sherry’s was Henry, who earned a PhD in ecology and evolutionary biology from Tulane in 2005 and now works in Sherry’s department as a senior professor of practice. Henry’s Natural History of Louisiana class, which she developed for science and non-science majors alike, has become a popular course on campus. In fact, she wasn’t able to accept her LOS award in person because she was leading her students that day on a field trip. Henry said she developed the course so students “could deepen their appreciation of nature and develop skills in observing, describing, identifying, asking questions about, and studying native flora and fauna.”

Henry said she’s consistently impressed by how much her students change over the course of a semester. “A student once told me, ‘This class has made me realize that I need to stop walking around with my headphones on!’ It’s like a whole new world opens up all around them—one that was there all along,” she added. “People are definitely becoming more removed from nature, for obvious reasons, but they can easily be brought back—and I’d say most of them really value the opportunity.”

Henry’s familiarity with the landscape of Louisiana began in childhood. “I grew up in uptown New Orleans as a nature-loving kid, in a family that had an appreciation for, but no background in, biology,” she recalled. “So I climbed trees, and encountered a lot of birds there—mostly inquisitive blue jays. I did not develop any expertise until I was in college, went on a guided bird walk in a local forest, and was stunned by the

beauty and diversity of warblers. Who knew there were all these jewels in the trees?”

Inspired, Henry studied birds in the Brazilian rain forest, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Ohio and the Yukon, among other places. “I finally realized that I knew very little about the birds back home, and so returned to Louisiana and joined Dr. Sherry’s lab so I could pursue questions about Louisiana birds,” she said.

From her home in Abita Springs, Louisiana, Henry sees plenty of birds. But even in the city—even in the middle of Tulane’s campus—an observant birder can find lots of treasures, too, according to Henry. “On campus we are surrounded by a shifting community of beautiful birds that we rarely even notice,” she said. “Very common species on campus include birds that are here year-round, like downy woodpecker, Carolina chickadee, blue jay, northern mockingbird, and red-shouldered hawk; species that are only here in the winter, like orange-crowned warbler, yellow-rumped warbler, blue-headed vireo, eastern phoebe, ruby-crowned kinglet, cedar waxwing, and peregrine falcon; species that arrive for the summer, like chimney swifts and Mississippi kites, and invasive species like house sparrows, European starlings, and house finches. During migration season an incredible diversity of birds can be encountered on campus—the list is extensive and includes real gems, like brightly colored tanagers and warblers.

“Our proximity to Audubon Park also means we can encounter various wading and water birds, although their populations have declined in recent years while black-bellied whistling ducks have absolutely taken over the park in the wintertime,” Henry said. “Bald eagles that nest across the river are also not an uncommon sighting soaring over campus. Tulane would be an even better place for birds if we could limit the feral cat population and window strikes—birds stunned or killed when they fly into large glass windows.”

Not surprisingly, in and around Tulane, a city rich in birds is also rich in water. “Water is everything in Louisiana,” Henry said. “It built us up and it wears us away. ... Water, in all its forms, shapes and provides habitat for a rich diversity of birds, from ruby-throated hummingbirds to bald eagles.”

As pollution and development imperil some of the water that sustains Louisiana birds, Sherry and Henry have worries about the creatures they study, but they are never bored. Birds, being “largely diurnal, fairly easy to observe and monitor,

fascinating in their behavior, and responsive to environmental change,” said Henry, “make them ideal study subjects for a lifetime.”

Danny Heitman, a columnist for The Advocate newspaper and a frequent contributor to national publications, is the author of A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House.

[This article](#) originally appeared in the December 2016 issue of [Tulane magazine](#).

“Water, in all its forms, shapes and provides habitat for a rich diversity of birds, from ruby-throated hummingbirds to bald eagles.”

Donata Henry