

A Tribute to Laurence C. Binford

By David B. Johnson

I was saddened to learn of Laurie Binford's death in September 2009 at his home off Agate Harbor in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Laurie was a very dear close friend and birding mentor for more than 20 years.

Our association began when I met his mother, Irene. His family lived four blocks from our home in Glencoe, where I grew up. One day in 1979, Irene saw a bird coming to a feeder in her yard that wasn't in her Peterson's field guide. Irene, an accomplished artist, drew a colored sketch of the bird and sent it to her son at the California Academy of Sciences where he worked as the curator of birds and mammals.

He immediately called her upon receiving and identifying the sketch to tell her it was a Black-throated Sparrow. Later I gave Irene a black-and-white photograph of the rarity she hosted in her yard that winter.

When Laurie came back to Glencoe to take care of his mom as she got older, I met him when I found a Ross's Goose at McGaw Park in early December 1988 near Waukegan on the north side of what was then Lakehurst Mall. Laurie came with Larry Balch, Gerry Rosenband and Walter Krawiec to see the goose which was, at that time, only the second or third Chicago area record.

Laurie had just published a site guide on Pt. Diablo California near San Francisco as the article appeared in one of the first HMANA journals as a premier hawk watching site on the west coast of the United States. In fact, it was Laurie who discovered this hawk site, one of the biggest on the West Coast.

Laurie was instrumental in developing the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee, a standing committee of the Illinois Ornithological Society. He also gave much time and advice to the fledgling Illinois Ornithological Society organization in the early 1990s when Eric Walters founded the organization.

Laurie also developed and published the Chicago Botanic Garden Bird Checklist with Richard Biss, Michael Hogg and Jim Steffen. This Checklist would later serve as a model for the Illinois Beach State

Park Bird Checklist. See Meadowlark 2:131-134 for Laurie's site finding guide to this great birding location.

Laurie also discovered and documented the first state record of Sandwich Tern at Waukegan Beach in Lake County (Meadowlark 2:13-14), and he discovered (or rediscovered) the first Illinois Record of MacGillivray's Warbler which was left unidentified for years in the specimen collection of the Field Museum of Natural History. (Meadowlark 2:47-50).

Laurie co-authored "First Confirmed Illinois Record of the Glaucous-winged Gull" (Meadowlark 4: 47-50), which was discovered by Louise Augustine, Andy Sigler, Pat Geis and Alan F. Stokie.

Laurie and I birded a lot together even in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. My family and I visited him both up north at Eagle and Copper Harbor and at Baton Rouge, Louisiana where he spent winters. Once in Baraga County, Michigan, he pished up a storm of warblers—and even White-winged Crossbills. He was the best of pishers.

We also discussed the undertail coverts and rumps of young teal and how to separate Blue-winged from Green-winged Teal young with Green-winged Teal having the creamier yellowish rears. We toured every local sewage pond up there and Laurie found a Ruff at one of these locations. At Copper Harbor we both were amused by an immature Northern Goshawk trying to chase a Belted Kingfisher, only to plunge into a pond—getting itself all wet and flapping its way to shore.

Laurie loved discovering rare birds or out-of-season birds on Christmas Bird Counts. Often he would scout for several weeks preceding counts in search of rarities. He once observed the Black-backed Woodpecker and Sage Thrasher on an Evanston North Shore count.

We saw the Northern Gannet together in Vernon Hills at Little Bear Lake on 9 November 1993 in a Vernon Hills shopping mall area. Laurie exclaimed, "It was the most out of place location for a rare bird sighting."

He also loved seeing the LaSalle County Gyrfalcon with Richard Biss

atop a farm building southwest of the nuclear plant.

Once when I showed Laurie an unidentified immature jaeger photo from Carlyle Lake, he took one look and said, "This is a Long-tailed Jaeger." He was never wrong on identification of birds, and was legendary on that aspect.

For an amazing story of Laurie's identification skills, see <http://cre-agrus.home.montereybay.com/CChronoSkylark.html>.

Larry Balch recounted this story showing Laurie Binford's identification skills:

"In 1987, I invited Laurie to come along with us to Attu. (He happily accepted, but was not nearly as happy when I accidentally tipped over the cart he was riding in and dumped him into a mud puddle.) On that trip, Frank Gill's wife Sally decided to play a trick on the group. She stood up at dinner and said 'I found this feather out on Alexai Point today and I can't figure out what it's from. Can anyone help me?' She passed it around and people puzzled over what Attu vagrant could have lost it. There was much speculation and guessing, but no one knew, until it reached Laurie, who took one look and immediately said, 'It's an Oilbird feather, Which it was.'"

Binford also founded the Western Field Ornithologists and the California Bird Records Committee. He described the nest of Marbled Murrelet, the last species in North America to have its nest discovered and was one of the last birders to see an Eskimo Curlew in Galveston, Texas, during the 1960s.

Laurie published the American Ornithologists Union monograph on Birds of Oaxaca, Mexico and his latest work was "Birds of Keweenaw Peninsula."

Among his many articles published in scientific journals was an account in the Auk (74:264-265) in which he watched an Eastern Phoebe catching and eating small fish in a lagoon at Chicago's Jackson Park, with two phoebes catching seven fish in 20 minutes.

He was a true professional ornithologist and birder in the utmost sense of the word.

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