

# Pat and Clay Sutton

## An Interview by Rick Radis

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*Pat and Clay Sutton (taken by Pam Higgenbotham)*

In the early 1990s I was a guest in the Goshen home of Pat and Clay Sutton, in Middle Township, Cape May County. Clay and I were working on environmental projects in nearby Cumberland County, and they were kindly saving me from the prospect of a lonely night in a cheap motel room and bad takeout. After dinner and talk filled with birds, plants, Jeff Healy, butterflies, and many other topics, we all headed off to bed.

Pat had recommended a book they'd both read recently, Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*. At the time, Clay and I were working for the firm Herpetological Associates, and the book held more than a little personal and professional interest. It was engrossing, and I stayed up far past the usual birder's curfew, later awakening to a dream in a darkened place, where I wandered around in the shadows of big lizards and a myriad of birds—ducks, eagles, owls, hawks, and countless others—lurking all around me. Then I barked my shin on a table, came up short, and realized it was just before dawn at the Suttons' home, and a Whip-poor-will was calling in the distance. Nearly covering the walls and filling the shelves of their house were wonderful paintings, drawings, and prints of innumerable birds, and scores of wooden duck, goose, and shorebird decoys. The word “museum” comes most to mind when thinking about the Suttons' home, and it is something of a living museum of two lives devoted to the world of birds, ardent conservation, backyard habitat and botany, butterflies, dragonflies, and a wide and generous friendship with the birding and natural history community of Cape May and the world.



"A living museum of two lives devoted to the world of birds." (taken by Rick Radis)

I first met Pat in the late 1970s, when she was working as a naturalist at Cape May Point State Park and I was chasing a rare plant which had a fun Latin name; she was one of the most enthusiastic people I had ever met, and still is. Clay I just got to know, somehow by osmosis, around the same time. He just seemed to be everywhere I went—the Beanery, Higbees, the Bayshore, Stone Harbor Point and the then-crowded heronry, the nascent hawk watch at Cape May Point—and for every question I had about Cape May and its birds, Clay almost always had a freely-given answer.

Pat and Clay are lineal descendants of the early ornithologists and naturalists who first came to Cape May in the nineteenth and earlier part of the twentieth centuries, in good company with names like Wilson, Audubon, Stone, Long, Brown, Urner, Griscom, Peterson, and Choate. Clay is a local boy who grew up in Stone Harbor hunting and fishing with his father, and absorbing local lore from relatives who dated their roots in the area back to the early 1800s. Pat grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, moving to the Cape May area in 1975, where she became one of the finest naturalists, and natural history teachers, that I have ever met. She pioneered backyard habitat gardening for wildlife, and gardens nurtured from her ideas can be found in the Cape May region and around the country.

Clay is a nationally-known expert on raptors, and is coauthor, with David Sibley and Pete Dunne, of *Hawks in Flight*, a book which has introduced thousands of people to hawk watching. Together, Pat and Clay have written *How to Spot an Owl*, *How to Spot Hawks & Eagles*, and *How to Spot Butterflies*. Their *Birds and Birding at Cape May*, published by Stackpole Books in 2006, is a worthy, and much more comprehensive successor to Witmer Stone's classic *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*.



*The Sutton's Home: A Backyard Habitat Model (taken by Pat Sutton)*

### **What are some of your lesser-known birding spot favorites?**

**CS & PS:** In our book, *Birds & Birding at Cape May*, we not only discuss the very well known spots such as Higbee Beach and the Meadows, but also many of the lesser known spots of the “Greater Cape May” area, up the Atlantic Coast to Forsythe NWR and Barnegat Bay and west along the Delaware Bayshore into Cumberland County. One of our favorite places is the Great Egg Harbor River region, and we birded it a dozen times this winter and spring and only once saw another birder!

### **Where would you go on a big flight day when the Point and Higbees are mobbed?**

**CS & PS:** We love to walk way into the heart of Hidden Valley and explore the inner pasture and the water lily covered waterways on the edge of Pond Creek Marsh. Here you may have the entire migration unfolding all around and all to yourself! Another great spot is the dunes at Cape May Point, or more specifically the dune walkovers and adjacent streets paralleling the dunes. They are great for fall out and very “under birded.”

### **The Cape May National Wildlife Refuge?**

**CS & PS:** This NWR is a miracle. It came at a time when we thought we could easily lose the Delaware Bayshore to mass development...cities stretching beyond North Cape May and the Villas all the way up the Delaware Bayshore. This refuge is piecing together what is left and that includes some sizable upland properties that were ripe for development. It's on the flyway. Morning Flight migrants that pass over the Higbee Beach dike fly north up the Delaware Bayshore, right over the Delaware Bay Division of the Cape May NWR. This refuge is also protecting another important corridor, Great Cedar Swamp. The Great Cedar Swamp Division of the Cape May NWR connects the Delaware Bay with the Tuckahoe River / Atlantic coast. There are some great trails throughout the refuge.

### **What do you think of the present twelve-month crowded Cape May?**

**PS:** What we usually call Cape May is such a finite area. But look at all those protected, diverse areas around it that aren't always crowded with people even at the peak times. There (are) so many other awesome places to go in Cape May County. And when people do go to these under-birded places they usually find things, unusual things.

**CS:** It's mostly the weekends that truly get crowded, but ninety-five percent of the birding is done in only about five percent of the habitat. When the parking lots of Higbee's or the Beanery are full to capacity, there's probably not a single car in the 20,000 acres of Belleplain State Forest, and the morning flight takes the birds right back there.

Talking about little-known birding sites, one place that is going to be huge, which I think could develop a reputation as good as Higbee's, is the new Villas Wildlife Management Area.

### **Is the Villas Wildlife Management Area the place that includes the old golf course?**

**CS:** That's it, the golf course, the old Ponderlodge golf course...Look at where it is in terms of the morning flight coming north right out of Higbee's. What it is now, is an overgrown golf course going to grasslands, they've left a lot of nice tree islands, there's some real wet woods, it's right on the edge of Cox Hall Creek. Last year there seemed to be a pair of resident Bald Eagles...And they've left all the golf cart paths in...There's one tiny downside, by mid-day there's all these walkers and bicyclers and stuff, but not in the early hours...

**PS:** And it's big, there's all these uncrowded back trails you can go on. You can go in there whenever you want...just park and go.

### **What are some of your favorite times of year in Cape May?**

**CS & PS:** Any day outdoors is a GREAT day at Cape May. We love "owling" in the winter months, butterflying & dragonflying all warm months (April through October), breeding birds and beach nesters in summer, and there's nothing like witnessing migration unfolding all spring and all fall. Most naturalists agree that May, September, and October are their favorite months here, yet we've always liked to "push" the seasons, as we wrote about in the accompanying piece ("The First and the Last") on this "Virtual Cape May" website ([birdcapemay.org](http://birdcapemay.org)). For example, August and December are some of our favorite times for hawkwatching, not only because of the first and the last aspects, but also because of the possibilities for the unusual or truly rare!

### **Most consulted field guide?**

**CS & PS:** Dave Sibley's guides! You can learn something new every time you pick it up, no matter what your level or experience. Especially love that birds in flight are illustrated – so helpful to migration watchers.

**CS:** For the beginning birder, the Peterson guide, the East, is the best. I think for birders beyond this stage, Sibley guide is best guide. It's what I use. To paraphrase Michael O'Brien—I learn something every day from that book. Though I don't have it immediately on me in the field most of the time. David Sibley is working on the Sibley guide to trees now, an idea which came to him while on a book tour promoting his bird guide. Sort of a captive of whoever was escorting him around on the promotional tour, he realized that most trees could be identified at a distance by their structure, without looking at twigs or leaves or bark.

### **When's the best time to visit for butterflies?**

**CS:** I think for spectacle it's the Monarch migration in fall. But you can certainly see butterflies every month of the year. Jim Dowdell had a record of seeing butterflies down here for something like 36 months in a row. The place is surrounded by water, so it stays warm, or relatively warm, for a long time.

**PS:** Anytime the butterflies are flying, spring through fall. Spring for azures, summer for diversity, fall for vagrants and the Monarch migration. And that's the thing, the season is so long here; last year it was almost ten months or more.

### **Pat, when did you start backyard habitat gardening?**

**PS:** When I began working for CMBO (May 12, 1986) I was more of a naturalist than a birder. At that time much of the focus of the environmental movement was on “doom and gloom” issues and programs focused on possible offshore oil drilling, water pollution, and other things we had little control over on the personal level. I saw “Backyard Habitat” as a positive focus, something we could all do something about – something we had control over. I grew up in suburbia. I didn’t want to see that happen to Cape May County, still full of rural areas, farmland, forgotten pastures. Atlantic City casinos had been approved, the Pinelands were protected, and growth for the casinos was being funneled down into Cape May County. I feared that cities would spring up all along the Delaware Bayshore.

During morning forays before work and while leading walks I was in a perfect location to witness first hand exactly what birds were feeding on during migration. As a self taught botanist I identified all the fruits, seeds, cones, and catkins (native trees, shrubs, and vines) that birds were using to survive while in Cape May.

My 2 “bibles” were:

(1) *American Wildlife & Plants, a Guide to Wildlife Food Habits*, by Alexander Martin, Herbert Zim, and Arnold Nelson (1951, Dover).

(2) *Trees, Shrubs, and Vines for Attracting Birds, A Guide for the Northeast*, by Richard DeGraaf and Gretchin Witman (1979, University of Massachusetts Press). This book was out of print for years, but is back in print & a GEM (as *Trees, Shrubs, and Vines for Attracting Birds*, by Richard M. DeGraaf, 2nd Edition Revised, University Press of New England, 2002).

My original copy of DeGraaf’s book is marked up with all the additional species I witnessed feasting on the various native trees, shrubs, & vines, beyond those bird users DeGraaf recorded.

In 1989 I wrote, laid out, & published (through CMBO), *Backyard Habitat for Birds, A Guide for Landowners and Communities in New Jersey*. This little booklet included 99 native plants that benefited our birds: 44 trees, 39 shrubs, and 10 vines. Between 1989 and 1996, 8,700 copies of this booklet were printed & given away at first, and later sold to cover the cost of reprinting. That means 8,700 people in NJ and surrounding states have been using this booklet & demanding of nurseries that they carry native plants (since 1989). Nurseries rebelled at first. I was told by a number of them that the native trees I recommended were “junk trees” (53 birds feed on the fruits of Wild Cherry). Each time I taught a “Backyard Habitat Workshop” I shared with participants that WE CAN CREATE THE DEMAND! And we have. Now many nurseries are carrying native plants.

When I first began teaching backyard habitat workshops, National Wildlife Federation was promoting and approving (with signage) wildlife habitats, but their materials included many non-natives at that time. They’ve come around since, thankfully.

I went on to write articles for NJ Audubon about “How to Create a Butterfly & Hummingbird Garden.” This material (noting which nectar plants are native to NJ or native to North America) is now available on NJ Audubon’s website (under the “World of Backyard Habitat” pages) & can easily be downloaded. I always wanted to update my list of native trees, shrubs & vines beneficial to birds and get it on the website too, but could NEVER get to it (with my zillions of other duties).

Now that I have retired from CMBO, I’ve formed ties with another N.J. Audubon Center, the Nature Center of Cape May, and will continue to teach Backyard Habitat Workshops and lead the very popular “Tours of Private Butterfly Gardens” through this center. I’m passionate about backyard habitat and look forward to presenting programs on it for Garden Clubs, Nature Centers, environmental commissions, whoever and wherever.

### **Did you have a role model in that?**

**PS:** Yes, my role model for Backyard Habitat was more in places than in any individual or group. My role model for the perfect backyard habitat was all the natural areas around Cape May: Higbee Beach, Hidden Valley, the Rea Farm, South Cape May, Cape May Point State Park, all the Wildlife Management Areas, Belleplain State Forest, etc. Each of these natural areas (each a miracle in that they were protected and are depended upon by millions of migrants) fill up with hungry birds. Watching these wandering migrants survive on the seeds, cones, catkins, and fruits of native trees, shrubs, and vines were my inspiration to spread the word and try to convince people to PLANT NATIVE, not ornamental non-native fluff, especially if they live anywhere on the Cape May Peninsula and actually anywhere at all! They will make a difference.

### **You have been lucky enough to have mentors. Can you talk about yours for a bit?**

**CS:** Mentors can teach so many things, and on so many levels. With our mentors I think that the lessons about what is *not* important may have been more valuable than those lessons on what is important. We wrote of our mentors at some length in the preface of *Birds and Birding at Cape May*.

**PS:** Clay was my mentor. He opened my eyes and heart to the natural world, including birds. I consider myself a “born again birder,” and strive to instill that passion in everyone I’ve ever known. Bill Bailey, a long time Cape May Point resident, was Pat’s teacher of botany and natural history. Al Nicholson was the person who introduced Clay to hawks and hawkwatching, and probably more importantly conservation and environmental activism. The late Ed Manners was our unforgettable owl mentor. And, you know, even though we didn’t know him in our formative years, Fred Mears, in retrospect, was a mentor too by way of his humble demeanor, always positive attitude, and his constant selfless teaching. We think of Fred nearly every day.

### **Clay, how would you describe what you do professionally?**

**CS:** Today, I am trying to focus mainly on writing. At 57 years old, it is somewhat “now or never” for places to go, people to meet, and things to maybe put down on paper. But for 20 years I have been an environmental consultant, first as regional manager and Vice President of a small environmental consulting firm (Herpetological Associates, Inc. – I was the staff ornithologist), and for the past ten years as a self-employed consultant, biologist, naturalist, and bird tour leader. In the consulting, I work mostly for government (federal, state, and local) and non-profit environmental groups and citizens groups. I specialize in endangered species and natural history inventory and habitat evaluation. I have done long-term inventory and monitoring work for Citizen’s United to Protect the Maurice River, Inc. for example.

That’s the long answer. The short answer is, I do a little of this and a little of that, and so far have managed to stay ahead of the sheriff. I truly love what I do – every day is different.

### **Pat, do you have things you’d like to write/do in the future?**

**PS:** Of course! Brimming with a passion for Backyard Habitat and the natural world, and eager to share. Clay and I have done lots of writing. We’re born educators. There’s no doubt that we’ll continue to put pen to paper to share our passions and try to help others appreciate the natural world to the fullest and to protect it before it’s too late. We’re very much looking forward to more travel. While with CMBO these past 21 years it’s been hard to be away (duty-wise) from Cape May and witness migration elsewhere during the spring and fall. This spring we explored the Gulf Coast (from Dauphin Island in Alabama to Lafayette in Louisiana to High Island in Texas) and came home through Arkansas to see the swamps where Ivory-billed Woodpeckers have been seen. This fall we’re

returning for the fourth time to Veracruz, Mexico, leading a trip for Hawk Mountain. And later in the fall we're going to the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival for the first time – presenting programs of course.

### **Are there any conspicuous holes in your Cape May below-the Canal or county list?**

**CS:** Yes, there are a couple of holes. Because I spend so much time hawkwatching in spring and fall, “looking up” so to speak, it seems I'm rather overdue for an Anhinga – especially when you consider the number of sightings for New Jersey. Also, I still haven't seen a Wilson's Plover in Cape May. I've never chased one mainly because I thought I would probably find one someday – but it hasn't happened yet.

**RR:** Pat has two birds on Clay for her Cape May list – Chestnut-collared Longspur and Henslow's Sparrow – both seen while leading CMBO bird walks.

### **“Best” bird/favorite story?**

**(RR: Do you remember the year of that prodigious robin flight that we all saw?)**

**CS:** Probably, the most unforgettable day was the “Robin flight” I describe in “The Bird Show” essay in *Birds and Birding at Cape May*. Still hard to believe. One other day stands above the rest. One late October day at the Rea Farm in the early 1980s a single kettle of hawks held 60 Red-tails and 40 Red-shoulders, and all five buteos (Red-tails, Red-shoulders, Broad-wing, Rough-leg, and Swainson's Hawk) were in sight at once. I estimated 650 plus Red-tails that day, but the flight was really inestimable. My favorite days are when migration is given such dramatic breath-taking form.

**PS:** I'll never forget finding my first Saw-whet Owl. We'd spent a day afield with Ed Manners along the Delaware River at his haunt, Thorofare, and learned so much about looking for them and just how hard they can be to see and find. A short time later, during the Cape May CBC, I said to Clay, I'm going to crawl under this felled pine tree and find a Saw-whet Owl. Clay laughed and continued scanning for soaring hawks and eagles. I walked through the woods to a pine tree, recently cut along a survey line. It held all its needles. The way the tree leaned on several splayed branches, it offered a dark, cave-like opening under it. I got down on my hands and knees, inched forward and there before me was a pool of whitewash. I stopped breathing and slowly raised my head to look into the branches over my head. There sat a Saw-whet Owl. Immediately I began backing out, ever so slowly. I'll never forget it! And it was the first of many exciting Saw-whet Owl encounters, all thanks to our time afield with Ed Manners.

### **What do you think of the birding/natural history community that has grown up around Cape May in recent decades?**

**CS & PS:** Cape May has ALWAYS had a rich natural history community. The Cape May Geographic Society (1947-1990) brought together resident and visiting naturalists: geologists like Horace Richards, botanists like Gil Cavileer, George Clark, and Bill Bailey, birders like Ernie Choate and many others, historians like Bob Alexander. Clay and I were very fortunate to be very involved with this group in it's hey day and to know (and learn from) many of these great naturalists.

Today many more birders are now year round residents. So, the knowledge base is year round. A great bunch of folks now live here and many of them give so much by volunteering to lead bird walks for CMBO