

Herb Cutler (1921–2017)

On March 8, 2017, the DVOC's oldest living member, Herbert "Herb" S. Cutler, passed away at the age of 96. Herb was a member of the DVOC for an astonishing 78 years, a club record. He was a veteran of World War II, having served as a B17 Navigator Bombardier as a Lieutenant in the U. S. Army Air Forces. Shortly before he passed, Herb gave the following interview with Rick Mellon, about his memories of birds and the birding community.

Rick: How did you get tied up with DVOC?

Herb: Good question, I'm trying to remember now. I heard about the DVOC and visited one night and I was hooked at that point.

Rick: What got you into birds in the first place?

Herb: Boy scouts, the birding merit badge. Ed Wyle who was a boy scout leader. Norman Jay McDonald brought my name up for membership.

Rick: Is there anything about the club that has changed and you feel has been lost and you would like to see reinstated?

Herb: Well, unfortunately, I haven't been too active in the last twenty, thirty years. I'm 96 now and equaling my grandmother's record. She came from Russia and you know how long they live. The DVOC was a very prestigious organization and it was an honor to be invited in as a member. You finally had arrived at that time.

Rick: Did some of the Academy people, like Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee and James Bond, ever come to the meetings?

Herb: I think so. As a matter of fact, James Bond was very helpful to me. I was 19 years old and got my first car. So I decided to drive down to Mexico. At that time, there were no books with plates on birds of Mexico. So, I went down to the Academy and I knew James Bond from the DVOC. He took me up into the third floor and they had these big cases with thousands of

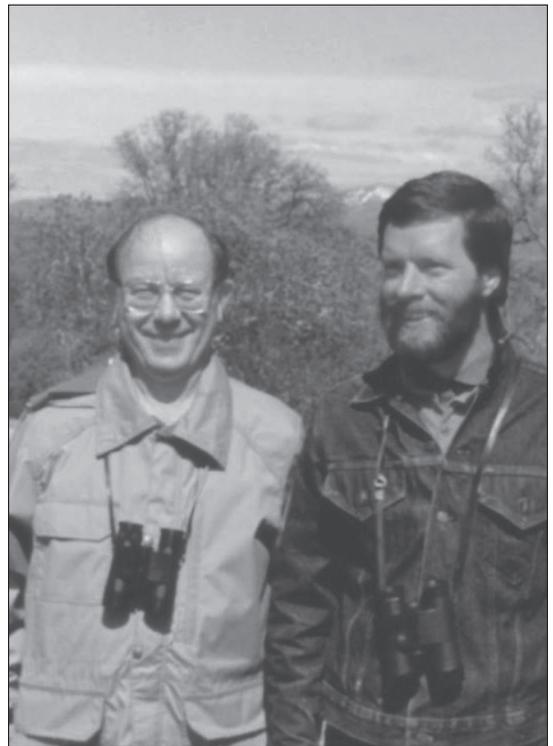
birds laid out chest up – have you seen that – and he would point out the birds we would most likely see. And Dave, my brother, and I took notes and we used that on our first trip to Mexico. We identified about sixty birds that way.

Rick: How far into Mexico did you go?

Herb: We went down to Guatemala, right to the border. We drove down and unfortunately, those days there was rationing of tires and one tire blew out completely and we were running on another tire that was bad so it was decided that someone would have to hitchhike back to the United States and get tires, or at least one tire, so it took about three days and I came back with a tire over my shoulder and saved the day.

Rick: Was that during the war?

Herb: Yes, I think so. You would not have tire rationing after the war.



Herb Cutler with his friend and fellow DVOC Fellow Jesse Grantham on March 9, 1983. This picture was taken in northern Kern County, California, where they successfully located a radio-tagged California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*).

Obituaries

Rick: I recall hearing about birders doing beach patrols for oiled birds during WWII and finding oiled Alcids and things like that.

Herb: Yes, we used to do that on Sea Isle City, I'm trying to remember the names of the Jersey shore places. We would cover miles and miles of the coast and pick up dead birds.

Rick: Were you finding a lot of them?

Herb: There were quite a few. They were mostly oiled birds. I did get one very rare bird. I was walking along the beach at Sea Isle City and I saw a feather sticking out of the sand and I pulled the feather and it was a bird – an Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) – and it's in the Academy collection right now. It was the first record, I think, in New Jersey. Of course, I don't know what has happened during the interim. It was a rare find. [Editor's note: The specimen is ANSP 146497, collected by Herb in February 1940 in Seaside Park – not Sea Isle City.]

Rick: Were there major differences in the club between then and now?

Herb: Oh, I think so. As a matter of fact, at that time, women were not allowed. For almost a hundred years there were no women permitted in DVOC. One man changed that.

Rick: Who was that?

Herb: Ben King. Ben was a leader on many of these overseas trips and we had been with him on a number of them. And he was posted as a speaker one night and we told him women were not permitted at the meeting. Ben spoke to the president, Jim Meritt, and he mentioned that he was going to bring Betty Cutler (Herb's wife) to the meeting. He was told women aren't allowed. "I'm sorry, I'm not going to speak then". Jim changed his mind and Betty and Evie Kramer were the first two women to be invited to a DVOC meeting. Ben King changed the complexion of DVOC after almost hundred years.

Rick: I know you guys had some terrific big days in Delaware.



A rare specimen (ANSP 146497) of Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) collected in Seaside Park, NJ, by Herbert S. Cutler in February, 1940. Photos by Matthew Halley

Herb: Oh yeah. I think by the time we finished years later, we got up to about 200 species in one day. But I remember, initially, we called it a century run because if we reached 100 it was marvelous. All our trips ended in the Pocomoke. We worked 24 hours around the clock. Pocomoke was a great place.

Rick: I understand you used firecrackers on your big days.

Herb: We were out one night in the swamps; we were on dikes which were near the Delaware Bay. It was about three o'clock in the morning and we stopped and we found if we threw a firecracker into the swamp, it aroused the rails.

So here we were throwing these firecrackers into the swamps and it made a loud noise. All of a sudden a car pulls up along the dike. Uh-oh, the police and he got out and "let me see your license." – "But officer we're watching for birds." – What? This was in Delaware and we happened to have a couple of stores (Cutler Camera) in Delaware, so I pulled out my license. "Cutler? Cutler?" – "Yes, we have a camera store in Dover" or wherever it was. We had a number of stores. "Ah, my father visits your store".

You know officer, we are actually looking for birds now. It's our around the clock 24 hour bird trip. "Oh,

that's unusual". Meanwhile he had called in a backup police car and he pulled up behind the other car. What happened apparently is that some hunters were out at night and they would kill deer and leave them on the trail. And the cars would slip off the dike and go into the swamp. They didn't like that. So they told us about it. The fact that we had stores in Delaware saved our lives that time.

Rick: There seemed to be a lot of Big Day competition between you Delaware guys and the Bucks County/Northeast Philly crew of Bob Sehl, John McIlvaine, Alan Brady, Les Thomas and Al (Krony) Kronschnabel.

Herb: I remember those names. In those days, you had highly competitive groups. Dave (Cutler, Herb's brother) and I were together and then we separated and competed between the two of us. It was mostly in Delaware. Down to the Delaware seashore and all through Delaware. Dave and I each had a separate group and we would go down to Delaware for a day and we would meet up at a restaurant in Smyrna, Delaware, and we would compare our lists at that time – that was the end of the day. And sometimes we missed some of the birds we would continue on for the 24 hours. It was an interesting time of birding. I don't think it's the same today.

Rick: It's good you had the opportunity to do it when you could.

Herb: Of course, not many people do. But, we've been fortunate to maintain our health to a reasonable extent. We haven't been active in birding, but we still have four or five feeders out in the back and we watch everything that comes through. Very active there. We keep the feeders filled and we get a lot of interesting common birds, but nothing really rare.

Rick: What's your favorite birding area?

Herb: Oh, I think the swamps in Delmarva were really intriguing.

Rick: Yeah, I wonder if they're still getting any Swainson's Warblers down there.

Herb: I think we did. I'm pretty sure we did at that time.

Rick: Do you have a favorite bird in our area or worldwide?

Herb: If I told you, you would laugh. My favorite bird is the Carolina Wren.

We have it here all year round. It sings in the wintertime. It's such a pleasant bird.

Rick: Yeah, neat bird.

Herb: Yes, it is. Wonderful call, very friendly and it nests right around the house.

Rick: Well, very good, any other thoughts that you have?

Herb: The DVOC has been responsible for cultivating many of the young birders because they could take them to watch or speak to experienced birders. Even today, I suppose, I think it's a great experience to speak to someone that is well known. When you spoke about birds in this area, you mentioned two names, Street and Potter. They were the outstanding people. I'm talking about the older (Fletcher). I don't think too many of those people are alive today. I remember birding Cape May with Potter and Street. At that time, we had our first...I was able to buy a telescope. It was a real pleasure. It changed birding for the ocean birds. Today, everything is pretty sophisticated. I think today you can get a telescope and aim it at something, push a button and out comes the name of the bird. Not quite.

Rick: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Herb: Betty and I have been to 92 countries around the world. And we've seen quite a few thousand species. And some of the most interesting was still New Jersey birding. Now, Africa and South America were really amazing. The swamps in South America – the Pantanal – I remember driving through that area and that is the most fantastic swamp in the world. We got quite a few species. Betty was pretty active but, we're too old for that sort of thing today. The DVOC is one of the outstanding organizations in my life as far as birding is concerned and I hope they continue to cultivate more younger people so that they can spread the word.