

## A Birding Interview with Jennie Duberstein

Jennie Duberstein is a mighty force for young birders and a major player in multinational bird conservation. She has dedicated herself to young birder programs through the ABA and other organizations since the 1990s. She holds a doctorate degree from the University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources and the Environment, where she is an adjunct faculty member, and she works as Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Sonoran Joint Venture, which conserves the unique birds and habitats of the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico. In her free time, Duberstein writes for The ABA Blog, serves on the Tucson Audubon Society Board of Directors, is a member of the Leica Birding Team, runs marathons, competes in triathlons, cycles century rides, and sings and plays the violin and guitar.

In this genial *Birding* interview, Duberstein reflects on life as a mover and shaker, taps into the power of people, and introduces the Oiselle Flock.

—Noah K. Strycker

**Birding:** How did Ospreys get you going on the path of bird conservation?

**Jennie Duberstein:** I've been interested in animals for as long as I can remember. I studied wildlife biology at Virginia Tech, partly because they had a joint program with their veterinary college and my dream at the time was to be a wildlife vet, and partly because I wanted to play volleyball. My dreams of being a vet were dashed by organic chemistry, but I played competitive club volleyball for four years and got a B.S. in wildlife biology.

My father, who passed away in 2005, was a kayaker, and he regularly paddled at McConnells Mill State Park, north of Pittsburgh, where I grew up. He found out about a summer field technician position at nearby Moraine State Park, put me in touch with one of the rangers, and there it was—my first field job. I worked for the Moraine Preservation Fund at a hacking tower to reintroduce the Osprey to western Pennsylvania, spending my days poking fish through a flap in a door to hungry Osprey chicks. It was smelly work. The days were long, and my mother basically gave up her car for the summer (thanks, Mom!) so that I could make the hour-plus drive each way to work five days a week. By the time August rolled around and I was ready to head back to college, I had a new focus: I wanted to work with birds. Things just kind of grew from there.

**Birding:** You're a mover and shaker—what makes you go?

**JD:** I am? I suppose if I am passionate about something, I want to share it. I love making connections and helping things happen for others. Whether it is connecting young birders to summer internships or helping partners in Mexico get field equipment, I truly enjoy helping people find what they need to move forward. I think it's as simple as that.

**Birding:** What are the connections for you among birds, endurance sports, and music?

**JD:** All three take a great deal of patience, and the more you do them, the better you get. They are also things that I can do anywhere and without too much specialized equipment. I love birding while running and riding my bike. When I moved to Tucson, I was riding my bike home from the university and was stopped at a red light. I looked up on the power pole and there was my lifer Harris's Hawk! I try to keep track of birds I see on my runs, too. I recently started running with a group called the Oiselle Flock ([oiselle.com/blog/introducing-oiselle-flock](http://oiselle.com/blog/introducing-oiselle-flock))—we call ourselves “birds,” and they even have a yearly gathering called birdcamp. Hearing that was the clincher—I knew I wanted to be part of the team.



The interviewee's path to bird conservation—and to birds like this Yellow-billed Cuckoo, banded and tracked as part of a research project on the San Pedro River in Sierra Vista, Arizona—was serendipitous. Photo by © Eli Rose.

**Birding:** What has led you to take a keen interest in young birders?

**JD:** I've always loved teaching and working with young people. My first official job with young birders was directing On The Wing,

the field ornithology camp of Colorado Bird Observatory [now Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory]. From there I became involved with the ABA's young birder programs, and over the years have done everything from edit their student newsletter to coordinate Young Birder Conferences. I serve as the ABA's Young Birder Liaison, a quasi-volunteer position, and I manage The Eyrie, the ABA's young birder blog ([youngbirders.aba.org](http://youngbirders.aba.org)). Also, I direct Camp Colorado, judge the community/conservation module of the Young Birder of the Year program, and manage the ABA Young Birders Facebook page. I do whatever I can to connect young birders—to each other, to opportunities, and to resources.

**Birding:** What is your image of an ideal Young Birder of the Year contestant? What are some ways that contestants mess up?

**JD:** Ideal contestants are passionate about birds and nature, and interested in improving their skills in writing, photography, field journaling, or community conservation. When I evaluate the community/conservation entries, I look for thorough but concise documentation, as well as a connection of the project to the broader community. Contestants can mess up by waiting until the last minute to put together their entry, not proofreading their submissions, and not reading the instructions carefully



With triathlons, as with birding, Jennie Duberstein figures the more you do, the better you get. Photo by © Sergio Avila.

and sending in incomplete or poorly documented entries.

**Birding:** What values do you try to instill in young birders?

**JD:** Never stop learning. No one is always right, and it is okay to be wrong. Acknowledge your mistakes. Take pride in your achievements. Teach others. Be kind.

**Birding:** How can ABA members encourage young birders?

**JD:** We are seeing a renaissance of young birder programs, with more camps, clubs, and other opportunities than ever before. There are so many ways that ABA members can help—make a donation to a scholarship fund; offer to chaperone a young birder field trip with your local bird club; invite young people to participate in your birding trips; and, most important, be a mentor.

**Birding:** Can you explain, in a nutshell, what your dissertation was about, what your current research is about, and how those things might be of interest to young people about to embark on college programs in birds and nature?

**JD:** My dissertation looked at how fishers and those working in fisheries management and conservation in the northern Gulf of California share information with each other and work to-

Jennie Duberstein (far right) co-leads Victor Emanuel Nature Tour's Camp Chirichua; these young birders participated in 2014.

Photo by © Jennie Duberstein.



gether, and how that information can be used to support sustainable management. The research took place in a part of Mexico that I love, and I got to work with some truly amazing people on the project. Although my dissertation focused on fisheries, the methods and results have broader applicability, and I've been able to use what I've learned in my current work.

I continue to do social network research, and have found ways to bring it into my job with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I am currently partnering with others on a network study of the human dimensions capacity of the Service, and a paper I wrote about the social network of early career researchers in the Sonoran Desert is about to be published. The field of human dimensions is gaining momentum, and I highly recommend that anyone considering a career in conservation take at least a few human dimensions—social sciences courses. Only by working with people will we be able to solve the issues facing bird populations.

**Birding:** How did you learn Spanish and get involved in Mexico?  
**JD:** Serendipitously. In 1997, I was hired by Colorado Bird Observatory. I got involved in their Birds Beyond Borders program, helping to connect classrooms in the western U.S. with classrooms in western Mexico. That's when I began to learn Spanish. In 1998, we took a group of teachers from Colorado down to Morelia to meet their sister classrooms, and it all grew from there. In 2000, I had an opportunity to work for Prescott Col-



A 1994 job with an Osprey reintroduction program in southwestern Pennsylvania started the interviewee (left) on the road to a career in bird conservation. Photo courtesy of Jennie Duberstein.

lege at their field station in Kino Bay, Sonora, so I took a leap of faith and left my job with the bird observatory.

During my year in Kino, I conducted seabird and wading bird research, but also became very involved in community outreach and environmental education—and my Spanish improved immensely. In 2001, I moved to Bisbee, Arizona, way down in the southeastern corner of the state, and that is when it all clicked. I began to work on community-based conservation and bird conservation projects on the Mexican side of the San Pedro River. In 2003 I was hired by the Sonoran Joint

Venture to do more of this sort of work—build partnerships between the U.S. and Mexico for bird and habitat conservation.

**Birding:** What are joint ventures in general, and what is the Sonoran Joint Venture in particular?

**JD:** Joint ventures are cooperative, regional partnerships that conserve habitat for the benefit of birds, other wildlife, and people. The majority of our funding comes from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I am a Service employee. In the Sonoran Joint Venture, where I work, we strive to conserve the unique birds and habitats of the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico ([sonoranjv.org](http://sonoranjv.org)). We bring together partners from both sides of the border to address issues that are too big for one organization or even one country to tackle on its own. My area of expertise is the human dimensions of conservation—essentially understanding what drives human behavior,

Deeply involved in bird conservation south of the border, the interviewee (front row, second from right) helps distribute the *Guía de Campo a las Aves de Norteamérica* free of charge to Spanish speakers in Latin America—including this group attending a workshop to design a bird-monitoring program for their parks throughout Mexico. Photo by © Jennie Duberstein.



and thinking about the best strategies for working with people to support our conservation goals.

**Birding:** Tell us more about the Mexico Birding Trail and the *Guía de Campo a las Aves de Norteamérica* project.

**JD:** The Mexico Birding Trail arose out of a collaborative project between the Sonoran Joint Venture and one of our partners in Mexico, Pronatura Noroeste. We created a comprehensive curriculum and trained teams of bird guides at three sites in northwestern Mexico. You can download all of the training materials or connect with and hire our guides on the Mexico Birding Trail website ([mexicobirdingtrail.org](http://mexicobirdingtrail.org)).

Before the Mexico Birding Trail project began, we conducted a bird guide workshop, and it was immediately apparent that we needed a Spanish-language field guide. Around that same time, a hummingbird festival was held in Tucson and there I met Kenn Kaufman. I was a big fan of his *Field Guide to Birds of North America*, and when he mentioned that he wanted to translate that book into Spanish, I helped him connect with Patricia Manzano Fischer, who ended up doing the translation. By 2005, the world had a spectacular new tool: the Kaufman *Guía de Campo a las Aves de Norteamérica*.

One thing led to another, and now the Sonoran Joint Venture has a fantastic partnership with Black Swamp Bird Observatory



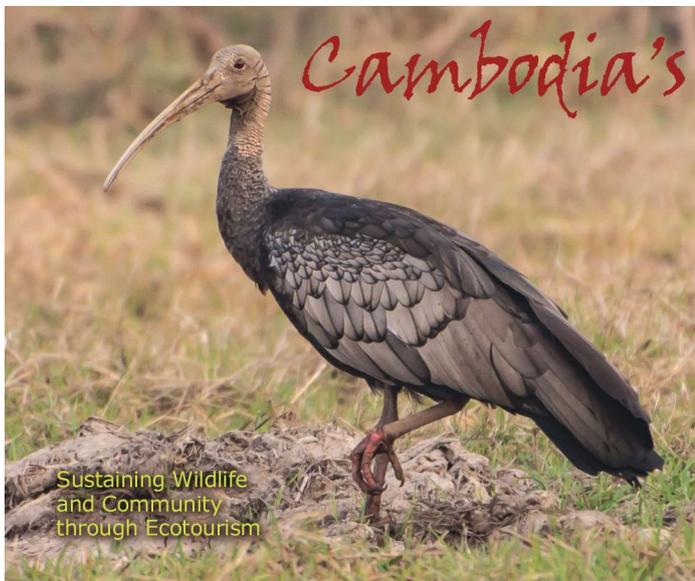
As part of the Sonoran Joint Venture, Jennie Duberstein helps conserve the birds and habitats of the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico—and that includes the Turkey Vulture. Photo by © Jean-François Therrien.

that makes it possible for people to purchase field guides to donate. The observatory sends the field guides to me, and I distribute them at no cost to people in Latin America or who work with Spanish-speaking populations in the U.S. We have donated more than 1,000 copies of the *Guía* so far ([bsbo.org/donate-the-guia.html](http://bsbo.org/donate-the-guia.html)).

**Birding:** How do you measure success in your many ventures—from marathons to bird conservation?

**JD:** For marathons, I always have three goals to measure success. My first is to finish. My second is to finish with a time that I feel reasonably confident I can make, usually just a little bit faster than my previous best time. The third goal is the “stretch”—something that would be amazing if I could meet it, but that I am not really expecting to do. I’m always trying to be better and improve.

In my professional life, I use that same rule and have multiple measures of success. I also create milestones and check points to help me evaluate whether things are working. If they are—fantastic! If not, I adjust and check in later to see if my changes made a difference. For some things, if I feel like I am making a contribution, then I count that as a success. With conservation, it isn’t always easy to see immediate results from your work. In my check-in sessions, I ask if I am still enjoying what I am doing, if I still feel inspired and motivated, and if I am still learning and growing. If I ever answer “no,” then it is time for a shift.



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