

**TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE: Victor Emanuel**

**INTERVIEWER: David Todd**

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**Google Voice** [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

**David Todd** [00:00:01] Victor?

**Victor Emanuel** [00:00:01] Yes.

**David Todd** [00:00:04] Good morning.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:00:04] Ready!

**David Todd** [00:00:05] Once again.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:00:08] Hello.

**David Todd** [00:00:10] Well, first of all, I wanted to just sort of lay out a little bit of the protocol on this. We would, of course, like to record it. And I, with your approval would like to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a web site for Texas A&M Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. And I ...

**Victor Emanuel** [00:00:41] That sounds wonderful.

**David Todd** [00:00:41] Of course, is that all right? I just wanted to make sure that's acceptable.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:00:45] All agreeable to me. That's perfectly all right.

**David Todd** [00:00:48] Super. Well, just to lay out where we are and when it is - it is April 11th, 2020. And we are visiting with Victor Emanuel of Austin, Texas, though I gather you are on Bolivar Peninsula and we're connected by telephone here.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:01:07] Yes. I am..

**David Todd** [00:01:09] All right.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:01:10] At my house, my house, which is named Warbler's roost, because I'm the Hooded Warbler, that's what Edgar Kincaid named me - my favorite bird. So I'm at Warblers Roost as a place to be sheltered during this crisis.

**David Todd** [00:01:25] I see. Well, a nice place to be at any time.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:01:30] Yes.

**David Todd** [00:01:30] Well, I was looking forward to learning about your experience 60-some years ago now seeing the very rare and I guess unfortunately extinct Eskimo curlews. And I wanted to thank you for taking time to talk about that.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:01:51] Well, I was a student at Rice University. I was in my second year of 1958. I started in 1959. It was actually my first year. It was the spring of my first year. I started in the fall of '58 and in '59 I was at Rice University living at home with my parents in West University, when I got a phone call the evening of March 22nd from my friend Ben Falter, who had moved from England to teach, oh, maybe five years earlier and we had become birding friends. And he called to tell me that he and his friend Dudley Deever have gone to Galveston Island. It was the first time Ben had ever been down there because he didn't have a car. So he persuaded Dudley to drive him down there.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:02:37] And when they were on Galveston Island, they saw this small curlew. Which he, in studying it, identified as an Eskimo curlew, and later in the day he saw a whimbrel; he had never seen a whimbrel. He went to Galveston hoping to see a whimbrel and he saw the Eskimo curlew first. He called me to tell me about it and I knew he was an excellent observer. I had no doubt that he had seen it, but I was astounded.

[00:03:03] For some reason, I didn't go back down there until, later, on, actually the 22nd of of, let me get the date right here. I'm sorry I should have had this. It was on the 5th of April. I went back down there with Ben Falter. I probably hadn't gone back down because I called my mentor and friend Armand Yramategui and he went down to look for it and didn't see it. So since Armand couldn't find it, I thought, well, maybe it is flown on. Maybe it had moved on. So when I went down on April the 5th, we really weren't looking for it, because we thought it had gone. But as we drove out Stewart Road, which is one of the major east-west highways on Galveston Island, as we got out of the city, into the cattle country and farm country, we saw a field that was, had a lot of shorebirds feeding in the short grass. It was a field with cattle on it and so where there are cattle, there are lots of droppings from the cattle. And that makes the field very rich in insect life, that the shorebird would want. So we stopped to look at that field because we saw so many birds in it and we were just sitting in the car scanning it.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:04:14] And all of a sudden, I saw this small curlew that was different than anyone I'd ever seen, smaller than a whimbrell, and buffier. There were whimbrells nearby. I said to the people with me, besides Ben, "We've got to get out of the car, and get on our telescopes and study this bird". so we got out and we put our scopes on the bird and we thought this is a very odd-looking curlew. It doesn't look like the nearby whimbrells and we would pan the scope where we were looking at the curlew and then move the scope, say, 15 or 20 degrees to the left. And there was a whimbrell and we could see how different it was. But I had been brought up by my mentor, another of my mentors, Edgar Kincaid, to get every possible identifying mark before you identify a rare bird. Now, I knew that Ben had seen it on the 22nd, but I wondered where we seen another Eskimo curlew or the one Ben had seen. Or were we seeing some kind of oddly plumaged whimbrell? Well, in Peterson's Birds of Eastern North America, it describes, quotes, Ludlow Griscom, one of the great birdwatchers and great students of birds that ever lived, who lived in Massachusetts and had said that the Eskimo curlew had greenish legs, green-colored legs and also the striped to call.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:05:36] So since we wanted to get every field mark, we did something I had never done before, and I have never done since. We were so eager to do that. We just went through the fence without asking permission. Went out into the cattle field. And as we got closer, we could see the bird did not have green legs, it had grey legs. So that made us think, well, maybe it wasn't an Eskimo curlew. And then the birds started flying as we walked out in the field. And my memory is that Ben said, oh, I just heard it calling, it sounded like a whimbrell. So that made us, again, more doubtful that we were really seeing enough for Eskimo curlew, even though it was so different than the nearby whimbrells,.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:06:15] Then we drove on out Galveston Island, continuing our birding. And that night, at evening, as we were driving back to Houston, I had this very sinking feeling that we had driven away from the bird of our life that this for not have been a symbol, that we should have studied it more. We should have gotten permission from, from the farmer, and we should have stayed out in the field. The other, while we were out the field, we thought we heard a gun go off. And that's one reason we left the field right away. It just probably wasn't we just thought we heard one, when we were very nervous about being in the field without permission.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:06:51] So I had that sinking feeling and the next day I went to the Rice University library and it had open stack, where you could just pick out a book and look at it. And there was a copy of Frobisher's "Birds of Massachusetts, " one of the great bird books ever written. And I looked in that book under Eskimo curlew. And it said the legs of the Eskimo curlew were grey. Well, leg color can change color in shorebirds depending on the time of year, or their breeding condition and other factors. So Griscom obviously was right, but so was Frobisher. When I read that, that removed my doubt that we'd seen an Eskimo curlew. And so the next day, I go back down to Galveston by myself. And I'm, and all the way down, I was worried that the curlew had gone. It had migrated, flown on north toward its breeding grounds in northwestern Canada, the only place that nests were ever seen.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:07:48] Well, I got there and the curlew was still there. I could see it from the side of the road. And this time, I talked to the farmer and asked permission to go out in his field. He said, "Sure. What are, were you looking for?" "Well, there's a small bird that might be this very rare bird, the Eskimo curlew. And he said that when he was a young man, man I was talking to, the farmer was probably like 75 or 80, he remembered flocks of curlews in the field, that he hunted. So he was probably, it was probably the same field that had had more curlews, regularly, in like 1910, 1920. Back when there were still a few more.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:08:28] Anyway, after getting permission, I went out in the field. And I spent two hours studying the bird, watching it feeding, watching it fly and lift up its wings. I could see the rich cinnamon on the under wing, on the axilars, right at the base of the wing, when it left. And I saw it at one moment. A moment I will never forget. And it's almost like, did it really happen? I had the longbill curlew, the wimbrell and the Eskimo curlew all in my telescope at one time. I could see all three of them together, something possibly no one had ever done, and certainly noone had ever got in many, many years, since the bird had become so rare. And it was described as so rare that some books said it was possibly extinct.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:09:16] So I left the field after a couple of hours and drove back to Houston and on the way back, I thought this never may be accepted. I didn't take a picture. I didn't have a camera. In those days people didn't carry cameras like bird watchers do now. But I know what I saw was an Eskimo curlew. I got back to Houston, I called my friend George

Williams, who taught English at Rice University, and one of his students, by the way, was Larry McMurtry, who wrote "Lonesome Dove". Well, George was, had started a birding newsletter called the "Gulf Coast Migrant" back in the 1940s, reporting bird sightings. And so he had become known in the birding community, not just in Texas, but in other parts of the country. And he had written articles in "The Auk", which is a publication of the American Ornithologists Union, one of the top birding, scientific birding organizations in the world. He had published notes with a debate he was having with George Williams, who taught ornithology at LSU. George Williams felt that the migrating birds, the warblers and orioles, flew across the Gulf of Mexico. George Williams, George Williams felt, I'm sorry George Lowery felt that. George Williams felt that they migrated along the Texas coast - they didn't cross the Gulf. So they were debating that.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:10:39] So he was well known. So I thought if I could get George Williams to go down with me to see this bird, then it would give it more credibility. So we drove down the next day and again, I was where the bird might be gone and it wasn't. And again, having permission to go out the field, we went out in the field. We studied the bird extensively for a long time. And George Williams said, "I think you're right. This is an Eskimo curlew". He wrote a note for The Auk and it says, "probable sighting of an Eskimo curlew", because he mentioned in his note, the only other possibility was it was a little curlew, which is in Asia and winters in Australia and New Guinea and wandered over to Galveston Island. There were no records of the little curlew for North America. So that seemed quite unlikely. But being very cautious, George Williams felt that he had to say, it could possibly be the little curlew. And so that was a sighting that he did get written up in The Auk.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:11:44] And later, Don Bleitz came from California and photographed it, numbers of photographs. Some other people photographed it, too, I later learned. And they saw that the underwing of the curlew, the axillar, or the area right at the base of the wing were rich, reddish cinnamon. The little curlew are not that way. So that kind of supported it, that this was an Eskimo curlew. It came back for several years. Numbers of people came down and saw it. And it was the bird of my life.

**David Todd** [00:12:21] That's extraordinary. What an experience.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:12:25] It was it was an amazing experience, and to see the whole thing unfold like that. And Edgar Kincaid came down from Austin with John and Rose Anne Rowlett and Frank Oatman and Fred Webster, who taught bird study to people in Austin. They all saw it.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:12:43] In those days, there was no birding hotline. And so very few people knew about the sighting. And so very few people came. One was Elisha Atkins from Massachusetts, who, was, taught at the Yale School of Medicine. And he had actually, it was remarkable, that Alisha saw it, because he had seen on Martha's Vineyard, the heath hen, which was a bird like a prairie chicken, not the same species that went extinct.

[00:13:13] One of the birds that's gone extinct, there's a monument of that bird, now. It's the same guy who did the monument to the Eskimo curlew, made one on Martha's Vineyard. So Alisha Atkins came down and saw it. A few other people came, as they say, Don Bleitz came and photographed it. And that year that it came that Ben saw it on March 22nd. Remarkably, it stayed, unusually for a shorebird, until April the twenty-sixth, I guess, the last observation was by Armand Yramategui, my mentor. It came back the next year and the next year and the next year, but usually it didn't stay that long. And I think the last year it was seen, which I

think was 1965, there's some difference of opinion on the last observations. There were two seen on different parts of Galveston Island. There was one, a few people were seeing one and five miles away, other people were seeing another one. Photographs that have been taken, Don Bleitz' photographs and others that have come up, show a difference in the bird, that two different birds were being photographed. So it's pretty certain that two birds were coming through Galveston Island in those years in the early sixties.

**David Todd** [00:14:28] Can you, can you help me understand all of context to me when you first saw these birds in the late 50s, this is a couple of years, I guess, before Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" had come out and really brought wide public awareness that there are these enormous risks facing the natural world. How did you think about a rare bird like this? What did it mean to you then?

**Victor Emanuel** [00:15:00] Well, the main thing that meant to me was, here is a bird that in my bird book, "it said possibly extinct". So, for a bird watcher to see a bird that's extinct is not quite like seeing a dinosaur and it's like seeing something from way time passed. And then reading about it, I knew that the Eskimo curlew had run the gauntlet migrating north from Argentina. It had an interesting migration pattern like the golden plover does, that it bred only in north western Canada, where the only place nests were found and only a few nests. But there were probably some in Alaska too. Then after breeding, it migrated across Canada, to Labrador, where it fed on these crowberries, and put on a lot of weight so they could migrate all the way to Argentina without stopping.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:15:51] Audubon went there and saw flocks of them in Labrador. That's how much Audubon got around. He made it to Labrador and saw big flocks of Eskimo curlews and it migrated all the way to Argentina to the grasslands of Argentina, where it set for winter. And then in the spring, it migrated north from Argentina, and came to Texas and the Great Plains on its way north. Well, as it was coming north through the Great Plains. So, in Argentina, people were shooting them, for food. But also when it came through Texas and all through the Great Plains, more people were shooting it. Well, they had wagon loads of Eskimo curlews. And some people felt that after the passenger pigeon was pretty well eliminated, and eventually went extinct, by men shooting it to sell the pigeons for markets. The next thing to go after was the Eskimo curlew. So that was another market bird that they could shoot and sell the Eskimo curlews in the markets. So it ran a gauntlet going North.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:16:54] The other thing that's an interesting possibility is there was a grasshopper, it was abundant in the Great Plains, when the Great Plains had grasslands. And the Eskimo curlew fed on that grasshopper as they migrated North and put on more weight and more fat so they could make it to northwestern Canada. And what happens with a migratory bird if it's not getting food during its migration? It may not make it to its breeding grounds. That's what's happening with a red knot, which used to be abundant on the Texas coast and on the East Coast. But it fed on the eggs of the horseshoe crab, and the horseshoe crabs have been eliminated so much that the knots are going way down, since they are not getting enough food on their migration.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:17:39] But I was aware of that. I was already very interested in conservation. And so I was aware of that as I was seeing this bird that was a bird from the past.

**David Todd** [00:17:54] You know, I'm also struck that in those years of the community of birders, was it sounds like, much smaller and quite tight-knit. And I'm wondering if, you know,

you've been a trailblazer in building this bird-watching and eco-tourism community and interest, and I wondering if you could sort of comment on what has happened since 1958, 59, 1960, for this whole interest in nature study and birds as well.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:18:35] Well, that's a very interesting point. It certainly has grown. And I think the the image of birders in the in the 40s and so, in 50s, were little old ladies in tennis shoes. Now, there's nothing wrong with little old ladies in tennis shoes, but it was not something that that younger people and men did. It was just older people that did it. And I don't know quite how that image changed, but I think Roger Peterson's books, I think Audubon magazine, I think the American Birding Association getting started, which promoted people trying to see as many birds as they could in their life, competition over how many birds you could see in a year. Articles about birding. I don't know quite why it changed or how it changed, but it did change dramatically. And I saw it change in my lifetime from the formation of the Texas Ornithological Society, and I went to the first meeting in about probably 1957 and organizations of birders started and people hearing from their friends about birds and how, how, how wonderful it is to see birds. I think better binoculars, the availability of binoculars, telescopes, also changed birding because you can see a lot more detail - the beauty of a bird and the detail of a bird. But it did change in the 60s and 70s.

**David Todd** [00:20:08] Well, while we're talking about the changes that, you know, intervened between when you saw this Eskimo curlew and now, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how its habitat has changed on Galveston Island, along the Texas coast.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:20:33] Well, I don't know that the habitat has changed so much on the Texas coast. The Great Plains, the Great Plains got converted to agriculture and cattle, and there wasn't maybe as much food for them. On the Texas coast, certainly there is a lot of development on the Texas coast, but there's still plenty of fields where Eskimos curlews could be. And and as I say, they stopped on their way north and from Texas north, there's still fields where there are cattle. And there's food for curlews. So I don't think it's changed so much.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:21:07] I think the big problem was the hunting of the curlew its migration, hunting of the curlew in Argentina, and maybe the decline in this grasshopper, which I think the grasshoppers pretty much gone. I think that particular animal is called the Rocky Mountain Grasshopper. I'm not sure.

**David Todd** [00:21:26] I saw the article that you wrote for the OK, I think published in 1960, and I was looking back through earlier annals of The Auk, and I saw two interesting articles, one that was written by Joe Heiser about his sighting of the curlews in 1945, and then another that mentioned that Connie Hagar had seen the curlew in 1950. And I was wondering if you could talk about those two people, who I think like you, have had such a huge impact on bird-watching and nature study more broadly.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:22:08] Well, Joe Heiser, his father, by the way, was the head of rthe Houston Parks Board. Joe Heiser was a man who had been interested in nature all of his life, who was a great conservationist and very avid birdwatcher and naturalist and helped form the Outdoor Nature Club, which was the first nature organization in Houston. And he and I think the Edna Miner, might have been with him, saw the curlew in 1945 on a road, not very far from where I saw it on April the 5th, of 1959. He was a great mentor for me and a lot of other people. He, along with Armand Yramategui started finding plots of land that they thought should be saved and raised the money to buy the land. And it was like an early version of Nature Conservancy: saving a bog, saving a patch of woodland and saving some of

East Texas to revegetate it, to make it like the Big Thicket was, with the native species that had been lost when it got overgrazed. And I was involved in that. And he was my mentor as a birder and a conservationist and got me interested particularly in conservation.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:23:21] Connie Hagar had moved with her husband to Rockport, Texas, and they had bought some land and had a little motel on it called Rockport Cottages, where people could stay, just a motel. But birders discovered this as a place in Rockport, another wonderful place on the Texas coast to see birds. Connie Hagar living in Rockport got very interested in the birds and did bird surveys where she was studying a lot of rare birds. And so it became well-known throughout the country as a place to go, the Rockport Cottages, and, and in fact, Ludlow Griscom came down and stayed at her place.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:23:59] Interestingly enough, since we're having this conversation about the Eskimo curlew, I just was on a trip in the Lesser Antilles on a wonderful boat called the Sea Cloud, and one of the participants on the trip had seen the Eskimo curlew at Connie Hagar's, near Connie Hagar's property in about 1950, and he showed it to Connie Hagar and other people came to see it. And he said photographs were taken. I think he said photographs were taken. So it's odd that I just ran into a man who actually was there, at Connie Hagar's, so Connie Hagar through her Cottages and her bird surveys she did. She had a drive she would do every day around Rockport and make numbers of all the birds she saw on that drive. And she became quite famous in the United States as well, with the top birders and bird researchers counting birds and seeing unusual birds.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:24:55] So I did just hear about that 1950 observation. And there have been other observations since the last ones on Galveston, one in the south side of Hudson's Bay in the fall, which they would migrate through that area when there were Eskimo curlews and some others on the Texas coast. But none have been documented with a photograph.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:25:15] And so the last accepted record, documented by photographs, was the ones on Galveston, I think, as late as 1965. Now one was shot in Barbados by a hunter in 1964. Barbados was an area where, like a lot of islands, hunting was very popular as a sport and shorebirds would migrate through there. And if there was a wind from the East, Eskimo curlews migrating to Argentina, would stop over in Barbados, which is out in the Atlantic from the Lesser Antilles, it was a stopover point. So that's the last actual specimen.

**David Todd** [00:25:57] What an extraordinary story. The bird's natural history, its life cycle, its migration. You know, its extraordinary rareness. I mean, you have told a wonderful story. Thank you so much.

**David Todd** [00:26:14] Was there anything you'd like to add? Any larger lessons you have drawn from that experience of seeing the curlew?

**Victor Emanuel** [00:26:23] Well, I would just add that, sadly, shorebirds in general are in trouble. Shorebirds are declining - all kinds of shorebirds. So what's happened to the Eskimo curlew, unfortunately could happen to a number of other kinds of shorebirds, because of a lot of factors - pollution, not hunting, so much, but destruction of their habitat, their feeding areas so they can get adequate food on their migrations. So if the Eskimo curlew, the loss of the Eskimo curlew, is, if we needed a wakeup call for the need to protect more habitat and provide, if possible, both from the breeding grounds, migration and the wintering grounds, for these shorebirds to continue.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:27:07] Those shorebirds are one of the great groups of birds of the world. They were Peter Matthiesen's favorite birds because of their long migrations. And there's some that migrate thousands of miles from their breeding grounds to their wintering ground without stopping. And he was very impressed with their, their stamina, their ability to cover those great distances. And he lived on Long Island, where there were shorebirds near his house and he wrote a wonderful book, "Shorebirds of North America", that he talks about his feelings about shorebirds.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:27:39] But the main thing is they're a wakeup call for many, many birds that are in trouble - warblers, shorebirds. And one of the things that's sad for me is that there are many fewer birds than when I was a young birder. And I just appreciate the ones we have and take advantage of the ones I can still see, but know that there used to be a lot more.

**David Todd** [00:28:04] Well, it's, it's nice, and I think when we first got on the line, you were talking about Todd McGrain's statue down on Galveston Island, that I guess is sort of a marker to bring more attention to the plight of these curlews, and then birds, more generally.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:28:24] Yes, he's doing statues of all the birds eventually that have gone extinct like he's done, he's done the heath hen, which is in the same race of the greater prairie chicken. But he's done the great auk, which is just one of the most remarkable. You know, it was almost like a penguin, this big bird up in the north, way up to the North Atlantic. He's done the great auk he's done a number of others, and he's going to do all the birds that have gone extinct in North America. And sadly, it's very likely we're going to have more going extinct during the next 10, 20 years. I would say one of the ones that is most likely to go extinct is the lesser prairie chicken because they're just not doing well. Their habitat is being destroyed.

**David Todd** [00:29:07] Well. I wanted to just take this chance to thank you for talking to me and to celebrate all that you've done to show people birds and help him appreciate how wonderful they are, and how important they are. So thank you for that. Thank you for your time today. I hope we get to see you very soon when you come back from Bolivar.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:29:35] Well, I appreciate your saying that. I think seeing birds and other things in nature give people a huge amount of enjoyment, but they give them comfort and healing, and in difficult times in their lives, in difficult times in the world, seeing a wonderful bird, can put you, as the Zen people say, in the moment where everything else goes out of your mind, you're just totally absorbed. with seeing that flower, that bird, that insect. And it puts you in the moment, which is a wonderful way to to be.

**David Todd** [00:30:13] Yeah. Well said. Well, it's been a treat to talk to you. And we treasure you and I really value the conversation today. So thank you so much. Take care of yourself. Keep in touch, please.

**Victor Emanuel** [00:30:29] Same for you and Wendy and your family, I hope everyone's very well. Take care. Bye.

**David Todd** [00:30:34] You, too. Bye now.