

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Ben Feltner

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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

David Todd [00:00:03] This is David Todd.

Ben Feltner [00:00:06] Hi.

David Todd [00:00:08] Well, I think I've got Ben Feltner on the line. Is that correct?

Ben Feltner [00:00:13] Pretty much, yes.

David Todd [00:00:16] Very good. Oh, you're so nice to call. Thank you. Thank you. Well, I look forward to visiting with you. I appreciate the opportunity.

Ben Feltner [00:00:29] All right. What can I do for you?

David Todd [00:00:30] Well, yeah. Let me, I have a little bit of a kind of a preamble that I was hoping to run through with you before we get into the meat of this, just to explain what I was hoping we could do and make sure that's something that's acceptable to you. Would that be OK?

Ben Feltner [00:00:53] Sure.

David Todd [00:00:53] Well, so thank you. The plan that I have, and I hope is agreeable with you, is to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, a nonprofit. And then also to contribute to a book and a Web site for Texas A&M University Press. And lastly, to give the material for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas here in Austin. And you, of course, would have all equal rights to use the recording. And I wanted to make sure that was OK with you.

Ben Feltner [00:01:49] So far, so good.

David Todd [00:01:51] Good. Good. Well, great. Well, let me maybe lay out a little bit of the context for our visit today. It is October 16th, 2020. My name is David Todd. I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas. I'm in Austin. And we have the good fortune to be conducting an interview with Ben Feltner, who is an accomplished birder and nature guide. I believe that he's based in Arizona, in Hereford. And this interview is being done by telephone.

David Todd [00:02:33] And today, I hope to talk to him about his rediscovery of the Eskimo curlew, as well as some general issues about nature study and conservation.

David Todd [00:02:49] So, that's, that's my introduction, and I would like to start with a question just about your education and background and how you got interested in the outdoors, wildlife and birds.

Ben Feltner [00:03:07] I was born in England and I became interested in birds when I was about three. My father showed me what was my key bird, was the European robin. And from that point on, I just kept going.

David Todd [00:03:31] And how did you educate yourself about the natural world and about birds in particular?

Ben Feltner [00:03:40] Mostly through books. I have a library of around 2700 bird books alone. My other education is pretty much self-educated. I only have two years of college because of financial difficulties.

David Todd [00:04:05] So you've clearly worked a lot through these books and I guess through fieldwork as well?

Ben Feltner [00:04:14] Oh, yeah. I've always been interested in nature, and as soon as I was old enough to go out by myself, I roamed the English countryside until I was 15 years old.

Ben Feltner [00:04:29] And then I came to America. My mother was a G.I. bride.

David Todd [00:04:37] I see.

Ben Feltner [00:04:41] Her second husband.

David Todd [00:04:44] I see. OK. And what brought you to Houston, which I understood you settled in, I guess in the 1950s?

Ben Feltner [00:04:53] My stepfather worked at Sheffield steel plant, and we moved here.

David Todd [00:05:05] And when did you first start going out in the field to bird along the Texas coast?

Ben Feltner [00:05:15] Kind of like I got off the ship in New Orleans and on the bus on the way, I saw my first two American lifers. And as soon as I hit the ground in Houston off the Greyhound bus that I rode, it was the end of July. I mean, the first of July. And it was hotter than the hinges of Hades. And I was pretty much exhausted but I looked out the window, and the first thing I saw was a mockingbird. And that was my very first Texas bird, so to speak.

David Todd [00:05:59] A good introduction. I understand that's the state bird of Texas.

Ben Feltner [00:06:02] Yes, and several other states. It's a very popular state bird.

David Todd [00:06:08] Yeah. And so what year was that that you arrived in Texas?

Ben Feltner [00:06:16] Well, I was aboard ship alone when the Korean War broke out. So it was 19 June 1950.

David Todd [00:06:31] I see.

Ben Feltner [00:06:32] And I actually got Texas on July the first.

David Todd [00:06:38] Gotcha. And how did you first start birding in the area? And you saw this mockingbird that walking you to the state. And what was your next step?

Ben Feltner [00:06:54] As soon as I was able, I took a hike to get out of town and walk to an area where I found yellow-billed cuckoos. And then I found a big pond or lake or something. I don't remember what you would call it, but it was part of the navigation district of the Houston ship channel where they dumped silt, silt from the channel and it matured into a marsh. I picked up spoonbills and herons.

Ben Feltner [00:07:39] And I guess the bird that first confused me most was the black-necked stilt. I saw these birds flying around and making a lot of noise that I'd never seen anything like it before. And I thought, they have long pink tails, but it was their long legs sticking out. So that was kind of peculiar. Took me a while to figure out what the devil I was looking at.

Ben Feltner [00:08:10] Scissor tails. What else was there? A couple of kingbirds and stuff like that.

David Todd [00:08:19] There was just a whole, a whole new kind of wildlife for you, very different from what you had grown up with in England.

Ben Feltner [00:08:28] Totally different. And there was no field guide, no one that I could use. So I was using the Audubon reprints of Audubon's plates, which are really not all that useful as a field guide. They're rather too large to take as well. But that's where I started learning about American birds.

David Todd [00:08:56] And with this a pretty solitary pursuit, or did you have people that you would go birding with who might explain things?

Ben Feltner [00:09:07] Oh, I went from being a freshman to a senior in high school and knew nobody that knew anything about birds. This was all solo. And I only could, I couldn't drive, so I could only birdwatch within walking distance of my home. I still managed to see over 200 species.

David Todd [00:09:40] Gosh.

Ben Feltner [00:09:42] Well, incidentally, that was without binoculars. I learned to stalk, to stalk birds very carefully.

David Todd [00:10:00] So you could get close and get a good viewing, I guess?

Ben Feltner [00:10:03] Yeah, that and following sounds that I was unfamiliar with.

David Todd [00:10:09] Did you chiefly bird by ear or by eye? What was your typical strategy?

Ben Feltner [00:10:18] I did some birding by ear, but since I didn't know any of the songs, I had to find them, just simply by stalking and seeing the bird, then trying to figure out what it was.

David Todd [00:10:37] I see. Well, let's, let's talk about a very momentous thing that happened, I guess this would be eight or nine years later, I believe, in March of '59. And you found your way to Galveston Island with Dudley Deaver if I've got my names correct. And you saw something very unusual.

Ben Feltner [00:11:05] Yeah. Dudley was my high school friend and I was trying to teach him about birds that I had found and he had never seen a whimbrel. So we were on Galveston looking for whimbrels. We found a number of whimbrels. And I was coming back in from the west end of Galveston, and I saw this curlew at the site, practically at the side of the road. It was near a fence post and no more than, oh, I would say 15 yards from the car. And it was totally different to me. It was totally different from the whimbrel. It was smaller. I had a finer beak and I took down a description of it at the time and told Dudley that I thought it was an Eskimo purview.

Ben Feltner [00:12:04] But what I had read about Eskimo curlews was they were extremely rare, and one shouldn't try to tell them, unless one knew whimbrels thoroughly. And I was just familiar with them but not thoroughly? Well, when I looked at that bird, I knew it wasn't a whimbrel. And the only other thing that I could think he could be was Eskimo curlew. At that time, I did not know about the little curlew in Australia was, since then I've seen many of.

Ben Feltner [00:12:41] But that was in the days before there were carrying, people carrying phones around and I didn't know who to contact. So after I saw the bird, we went tearing back down the island, and the first house we came to, I knocked on the door and a young lady came and I just, I told her I just seen a very rare bird. Do you know anybody that's interested in birds? She said, "My mother is." And then she said, "But she's out." So, anyway.

Ben Feltner [00:13:19] So I ended up driving all the way back to Houston and I had just joined the Houston Outdoor Nature Club. Sounds a little bit like a nudist colony, but it's not. And they had what they call an ornithologist group. And the man wrote the monthly paper was Mr. Henry Hoffman, and I called him up, and spoke to him on the phone, and described this bird to him. I didn't say what I thought it was. I described this bird. He said, "oh, my God. That must have been an Eskimo curlew!" That was before I started, really.

Ben Feltner [00:14:08] And then the following week, I was joined by Victor Emanuel and Ron Fowler, who were young birders at the time, and we managed to locate the bird again in a field that was closer in. And we got out of the car and this field was full of whimbrels, long-billed curlews, and golden plovers. And in the top right hand corner of the field, towards the Gulf, I spotted this small curlew and I pointed it out and said, look at that bird or something to that effect. I'm not sure of the exact words. And Victor looked at it. And he said, "Oh, my God, that's the bird", or something like that. And from that point on, I guess everybody was going down or looking at it and looking for it. Fortunately, it had hung around for some many days.

David Todd [00:15:24] Tell me a little bit about the people who came down to look at it. I mean, this is the birding community back then must have been small, but very serious and excited about your discovery.

Ben Feltner [00:15:37] Almost all the birders that saw it that year to my knowledge, were all Houstonians, all local. I'm trying to remember their names: Steve Williams was one, George Williams' son. George Williams was a local birder of some renown. There was a really good birding man named Artie Mackie, who I would trust to identify anything anywhere, but he's passed on now, unfortunately. And he came out of Cove where he determined that he never

could see all the birds anywhere else. So he just birded in his own county pretty much. And that was the only time I ever knew him to go to Galveston to look at a different bird. That to me was a real prize to get Artie to come out because he knew birds backwards and forwards.

David Todd [00:16:50] So it's interesting to me that that of this bird was seen in 1959. And my understanding is that it had been witnessed before. Maybe not confirmed, but apparently seen by a fellow named Joe Heiser, who I guess was a member of the Outdoor Nature Club, too.

Ben Feltner [00:17:19] Yeah, Joe was Joe was a superb birder too. He was with a group of, I remembers that Mary Bell Kokesh was one of the ladies with him. And there's no doubt in my mind that Joe found two Eskimo curlews. And that was, I think somebody said April 1959 [1945], but it was actually March. It's in lit as April. But that's wrong. It was March. I talked to Joe.

David Todd [00:17:57] And that was in 1945?

Ben Feltner [00:18:00] Yes. Yes. And Joe was freshly out of the army.

Ben Feltner [00:18:06] And was it in the same general vicinity of Galveston Island?

Ben Feltner [00:18:12] I don't know exactly where he saw it, but it was West Galveston Island. Yes, within a few miles where I was.

David Todd [00:18:21] Interesting. So these birds had some fidelity to that area, it sounds like.

Ben Feltner [00:18:28] Well, I guess you know that we, I say "we", I did not subsequently see it first in the following years, up to '62. But I did see it every year up until '62 when there were two. There were two. And the amazing thing about that was, we were watching one at one end of the island and somebody came up and said, the Eskimo curlew who is with Bob Dayhay at such and such a place. And we got in the car and drove maximum speed, close to 90 miles an hour at times, to get to this other field in case the other bird flew through it. But when we got there, there was another Eskimo curlew.

David Todd [00:19:26] Wow.

Ben Feltner [00:19:29] And that was the last time - 1962 - as far as I'm concerned. It was the last real time that anybody saw one alive. There have been subsequent reports. Some of them were quite messy. It is a difficult bird if you're not familiar with curlews, but if you are familiar with them, it's not difficult. It's, it's quite easy.

Ben Feltner [00:20:04] I don't know how to say this. Somebody subsequently reported a number of curlews. I don't remember which year it was. But my friend Jerry Strickland called me and said, can you check it out? And I forget the number of curlews they reported. I think it was like 22, 17, or 22 or something like that. And I drove to the place where they had been seen and you had to walk up kind of a little dike. And I walked up the dike and looked down and there were exactly the same number of Eskimos as whimbrels as Eskimo curlews reported. And unfortunately, that got in the literature, as Eskimo curlews. And one of the observers is still alive, so I don't want to denigrate their name.

David Todd [00:21:10] And this, this I guess was, if I am correct, this was the viewing in 1983. Is that right? I think there were a couple dozen birds seen.

Ben Feltner [00:21:21] Yes, I think so, yeah. Well if that was the Galveston one, yes, I'm pretty sure it was. I don't know anybody else who reported it. And I don't know how it got reported to Jerry.

David Todd [00:21:42] Well, could you help, sort of, set some of the stage for these, these observations and maybe help us understand more about the curlew? My understanding is that it was a very common bird in the 19th century and then took a terrible decline. Can you tell us a little bit about why that happened?

Ben Feltner [00:22:14] Well, of course that was, I'm 86, but that was even before my time. So from historical readings that I've done, it was heavily marketed as a food bird because they were, they tended to grow very, very fat. And so they were slaughtered without any kind of, I mean, there were no rules. So people would go out and just kill them by the hundreds. And they use shotgun loads and shot into flocks of them. And unfortunately, they apparently wheeled back when birds fell out. The flocks would, would turn and come around again. So they kept shooting and shooting and they actually had cart loads of them to take to various butchers and places. That much I know.

Ben Feltner [00:23:26] And they, they fed on crowberries in the Arctic. And that's what fattened them up for I think they went towards the Argentina plains for the wintering. That's, that's what I read.

David Todd [00:23:52] Well, I understand they had a pretty extraordinarily distant migration that took them thousands of miles. Is that right?

Ben Feltner [00:24:04] Yes. From the Arctic to the Argentine prairies. That's a pretty long way. It's not quite as long as the Arctic tern, but it is a pretty long way.

David Todd [00:24:19] And so, sorry.

Ben Feltner [00:24:22] They flew partly over the Gulf, or maybe even out in the Atlantic. I don't know. We didn't ever see one in the fall here. Not while I was alive. All the observations were done in March and April.

David Todd [00:24:41] So it was sort of a, a loop then, I guess, from Canada to the East Coast and then down to Argentina and back up the, the middle part of the United States, is that right?.

Ben Feltner [00:24:54] They used the central flyway to come north. And they probably used the eastern flyway, too, since they were found in the east during migration. But...

David Todd [00:25:11] I see.

Ben Feltner [00:25:12] They came heavily through Texas and Nebraska and up through that way, apparently, that was their central way up north. And I don't know where exactly they nested in Canada. Some, there were some sightings reported in Canada after the Galveston ones, but they were never verified by photograph or anything but rumor. So I didn't, I didn't put much on those reports. I think differently about them.

Ben Feltner [00:26:00] The founder of the American Birding Association, Jim Tucker, and I spend two or three springs on Galveston just looking for Eskimo curlews. After the last '62 sighting. And we looked in every short grass field that you could possibly find them in and never saw them again. Whereas the other birds, their companion birds, were always there. Golden plovers and whimbrel, things like that, were always there, but never another Eskimo curlew.

David Todd [00:26:47] They were gone. Sort I'm curious if we could maybe hear what you have to say about other reasons for why they became so rare. I've heard some people speculate that perhaps it was because of the loss of the Rocky Mountain grasshopper. Do you see some, some significance there?

Ben Feltner [00:27:21] I can't have really answer that, but I can't imagine that that would make a significant difference unless they spent a lot of time just feeding on that particular insect. I would think that the main food coming south was the crow berries and things that they ate in the tundra. So in going north, I don't know what they ate. Apparently, they were numerous enough to be shot by the thousands.

David Todd [00:28:03] Well do you think perhaps it was just, at least in part, that their migratory route took them through a lot of settled areas on the Eastern seaboard and up the Plains states, and they just got exposed to these market hunters?

Ben Feltner [00:28:23] Well, definitely. That was, as far as I'm concerned, probably the biggest thing was just overhunting. I mean, animals reach a minimum population point at which they're almost destined to die out simply because the gene pool isn't sufficient anymore. And I think what happened was, as with the passenger pigeon, they shot so many, the gene pool got too small. They died out probably from that more than anything. I mean, I think it was amazing, that from 1945 to 1959, even though there were birders going to Galveston all time, no other reports were made.

David Todd [00:29:26] Well, and why do you think that was.

Ben Feltner [00:29:29] Pardon?

David Todd [00:29:30] Are they just, I'm curious why there were these big gaps between like 1945 and '59 when the birds were not seen? Or is it just difficult to distinguish them in that tawny landscape, and you've got a buff bird. Or they just weren't in Galveston long enough - you know, they'd be there for a month and then they'd be gone or, why do you think they were so.

Ben Feltner [00:29:58] They only came to Galveston and probably the last week of March and the first two weeks of April and Galveston was a very popular birding place for the Houston people. That's why Joe was there. But I think the numbers were just so low that people didn't even think about looking for them and may even if they had been there, and of course, they had been there because two, at least two survived that long. And they had been there, but they hadn't been lucky enough to have been there looking on the day that the curlews came through.

Ben Feltner [00:30:47] So other than that, I can't explain it. It's just inexplicable why that noone saw one in between that time, except that there were so few, and they could have easily

been mistaken for whimbrels at a cursory glance. People would see to long-billed curlews and whimbrels and may have completely overlooked the fact that the Eskimo curlews were there, unless they were close together.

Ben Feltner [00:31:21] I mean, the only reason I knew that the Eskimo curlew was an Eskimo crew was because my first look at it was at such a close distance. And as I told you before, I'd been used to birding by eye, very intensely, a long time before I got a pair of binoculars.

Ben Feltner [00:31:48] I'm sure there were scattered birds coming through occasionally, but it's just the luck of the draw that I happened to be fortunate enough. And the thing is that when I found the curlew, it incited other people to look. And that's what happened in the succeeding years.

David Todd [00:32:11] That's interesting.

Ben Feltner [00:32:16] '61, '62.

David Todd [00:32:17] Could you talk about how your rediscovery of it in '59 might have spurred this, you know, this kind of strategic, all-hands-on-deck look for the bird?

Ben Feltner [00:32:33] Oh, it did. That's it. I mean, the other people that saw it that year looked for it the following year. I mean, they were out looking for Eskimo curlews. So, the fact that they appeared, when looked for intensely, was, was a result of the fact that we found the one that was still extant. And actually I think even that year, the first year, I think there were probably two birds because they were in two different places far apart. The one, the first one I saw was not in, it was probably five or six miles from the one, the second one. Although that's not far for a curfew.

David Todd [00:33:35] Yeah, it sounds like a bird that can fly thousands of miles.

Ben Feltner [00:33:39] That's why we, in '62, that's why we race like hell down the island to make sure that we weren't reporting the same bird from two different places. But the fact that we left the bird there and within like 10 minutes we found the other one feeding peacefully in the other place. Actually, we did not find that one, Bob Dayhay, I think, found it.

David Todd [00:34:11] Could you talk a little bit about your, your approach to identifying a bird that is so rare and easily confused with other species? Whether it's the landscape or the time of year or the kind of markings. How, how would you prove up this kind of a bonus bird, you might say.

Ben Feltner [00:34:35] Yeah. You know, being familiar with a whimbrel, I knew approximatively what it should look like. And the first thing that struck me about this bird was that it was smaller. It was obviously smaller and it had a smaller, finer bill. And then, in retrospect, while we were watching it, I realized it was browner than the whimbrel. The whimbrel seemed cold-colored to me, not warmly brown. And the overall aspect you got in a look of an Eskimo curlew, was that it was browner. That stood out, plus the fact that it was small. And plus this fact that its head stripes were not the same. A whimbrel has very distinctive head stripes and the Eskimo curlew had a face, a good strong face stripe. But the top of the head was more capped effect than a stripe, than a four-inch stripe, if that makes sense.

Ben Feltner [00:36:01] I don't know. That's the kind of thing. I knew that it was different right away.

David Todd [00:36:12] It's so interesting that, you know, champion birders, like you have this sort of library of, of markings and aspects and, you know, distinguishing factors with literally hundreds or thousands of birds and has this ability to correlate it with what you're looking at in the field and I was, you know, is there any way you can describe how you do that? I mean, it's a real challenge for most people to distinguish very, you know, regularly seen birds.

Ben Feltner [00:36:50] There are great numbers of, nowadays, that are great numbers of birders who are very good at picking up individual idiosyncrasies of birds and there are some people that when I led tours, I realized that there were people that you could show them a bird and they would be delighted to see it. And five minutes later, you showed the same bird and they would not know what it is.

Ben Feltner [00:37:28] And other people would see a bird for the first time that they've never seen before, but had read about it in the books and they'd look at it and say, "Oh, that's new. I've never seen that before." And that's what they called a "lifer". It's I guess it's just a difference in the people and how they observe things. There's some people who have it and some people that don't have it. And the people that really, really have it are the great birders. They're the ones that find the rarities, that pick out the birds that immediately looks different to them.

Ben Feltner [00:38:15] I remember one time seeing a bird fly across the road. I was in Alaska. Actually, I was in the Aleutians. I went there with a group and we were looking to see a bird that was in, that's found only in the mid Aleutians. But we're were in a bus in Dutch Harbor, and we were coming back and a bird flew across the road in front of me. And I made the bus driver stop and he didn't want to stop because of the traffic. So I said, "you got to stop. That's a turtle dove." And I'd never seen that bird before. And it flew across the road and I knew what it was. And people piled out of the bus. And one of my friends took a number of pictures of it, and I don't know how many records there are for the United States, but that's one of them. All I saw was the bird fly across the road in front of the bus.

David Todd [00:39:28] And you registered that almost instinctively.

Ben Feltner [00:39:29] Immediately I knew what it was. That's right. I can't explain why. I just knew. Like I said, I have a huge library of bird books. I'm sitting in the middle of them right now.

David Todd [00:39:49] Well, tell me. This is a good segue to learn a little bit about another aspect of your life. And that's guiding. Taking nature tourists, ecotourists. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about that experience in your life and maybe describe something about Peregrine Birding Tours, which I believe you helped organize.

Ben Feltner [00:40:17] Well, Peregrine was my company, but before that I was in a partnership with a young lady and we started a tour company called Merlin Birding Tours and started it out on four hundred dollars and a lot of hopes. Guiding people in some ways is very, very satisfactory. And it can also be very, very difficult when you have people on board that are just specifically looking for certain birds to add to their life list and are totally not interested in anything they've seen before. They only want to see the new birds. And of course, we have all kinds of people to deal with.

Ben Feltner [00:41:14] I enjoyed showing birds to people that enjoyed birds. Not necessarily somebody that just wanted to add one to their list, but primarily that's what most people nowadays want to do. They want to add birds to their life list so they have big numbers on their life list.

David Todd [00:41:42] That's interesting. So I guess there are some people who are birders because they enjoy being outdoors or getting a sighting of a beautiful bird. And there's just value in that experience. And then there are others who are maybe more list-keepers and tally-takers?

Ben Feltner [00:42:07] They're extremely competitive.

David Todd [00:42:10] I see.

Ben Feltner [00:42:17] And actually sometimes they become so competitive that they forget about the beauty, I think. All they're interested in is getting another bird on the list.

Ben Feltner [00:42:28] What drove me to the natural world and the other was the beauty of the things in it, especially birds, because they're so perfect.

David Todd [00:42:43] Tell, tell me about what you see in birds. They're perfect. Their beautiful aspect. How do you, how would you describe that?

Ben Feltner [00:42:56] Almost all birds are completely and perfectly adapted to their environment. They don't have anything given to them. They have to work for their life. Their different structures are made for various habitats. And then somewhere along the evolutionary channels, when birds became birds, they started wanting to attract each other. So they developed these gorgeous plumages that are just incredibly beautiful. And among those birds are birds that to ordinary people look plain. They're brown. But if you look at them closely, you will find out many of them are intricately marked so that they're really covered with all these different colors and patterns so that they either blend or stand out, whichever they want to do.

Ben Feltner [00:44:09] I've seen a good many of the most beautiful birds in the world. Some, some of them so elegant, so beautiful, that everybody recognizes immediately that they are gorgeous. And then there are others like the, what we call the nightjars. They're patterned in oh, browns, tans, grays, mauves, all these different colors, but you don't see that unless you look closely, it just looks like a brownish bird.

David Todd [00:44:52] So part of birding, I guess, is just very close observation and seeing these, these very special, distinct details.

Ben Feltner [00:45:03] I think most great birder are aware of the individual coloration of birds as being very important. There are other ways to identify birds, but mostly it's pattern. There's another. There are other methods like jizz, which means general overall aspect of a bird, the Gestalt kind of thing, and then there's the difference in their feeding habits. Where you find them. For instance, you don't look for curlews in treetops, but you wouldn't look for warblers on a beach, normally.

David Todd [00:45:58] Interesting. It has to fit.

Ben Feltner [00:46:03] Yeah, birds, unless something too untoward happens, birds will found, are found in their habitats, what they're built for.

David Todd [00:46:18] Well, I have. I have another question that comes to mind. You told me a little bit about birding and guiding, and I was hoping you might talk a little bit about censusing, surveying and maybe the bird counts that you've been involved with. I think you were one of the very early people engaged with the Freeport, Freeport Christmas count, as well as ones down in Mexico, El Naranjo and Catemaco.

Ben Feltner [00:46:52] The first one was the annual Audubon Houston Christmas count. And that's where I got involved with them. And then, when I met Victor Emanuel, he had just started the Freeport count and the Freeport count, his major goal was to be number one in the nation. And I pretty much was one of the first people to join him in that. Probably about 10 of us on the first count, but eventually it got to where Victor was asking people from all over the United States to join the Freeport counts so it could compete with Cocoa, Florida, which was the number one count at the time. And we eventually did surpass their numbers.

[00:47:59] And then the Audubon Society opened up the idea of birding in other countries. And our immediate thought was the place we liked in Mexico, Victor and I both liked. So we started the El Naranjo Christmas count. And then after about three years, Vic dropped out and I took it then for I think the following seven years before I dropped out. And the problem with birding in Mexican counts was getting people down there, because we didn't know any native birders in Mexico. So we had to take the entire entourage down there or invite people down. And that was a big problem every year. Getting that done and then eventually after that, we did one in Catemaco. And then I went on and started one in Teziutlan, in Puebla. I ran that one for a few years and then kind of quit doing the Mexican counts of because it was so exhausting trying to get people down there. I really love Mexico. Mexico is a great place.

Ben Feltner [00:49:43] Well, could you maybe recount a typical Christmas count in Freeport and how that would start from early in the morning, or maybe you would start planning this in days and weeks beforehand, and then maybe run through it for us? How the count might proceed up to the point where y'all are judging people's reports of birds they've seen?

Ben Feltner [00:50:12] Oh, oh. Usually we would set a date for the count and then decide. That the earliest point in the count. There's a count period, or was a count period, when it was legal to take the Christmas counts, legal by National Audubon Society's standards, and they had to be within the 15-mile circle anyway. There was a legal area and we decided that the best time to do it was as early in the count circle time as possible because it was really the best time to find birds that may be the lingering that should have been gone, so you could depend on finding maybe five, 10 species that normally wouldn't be there at that time of year. But one or two individuals of them had lingered. So that was the best time to take the count.

Ben Feltner [00:51:24] And then there was a matter of sending sufficient people, down there into the circle, at that time to get the count done. But then we would, after we've discovered the dates, we would go a week ahead of time, or two weeks ahead of time, or maybe both weekends, before the count period, and look for birds to see if we could find them on count days.

Ben Feltner [00:51:57] And then various sections of the count would be given to various people to do by themselves and then bring everything to the count period count-up.

Ben Feltner [00:52:21] And the thing was, we would try to find the birds in the areas that were rare, that we hadn't found already. So to the Freeport count, it was more interested in the number of species than the actual count of the birds, which was what the Audubon Society was originally about, I think, more how the bird numbers fluctuated. But we would get the numbers as well. But we were really more interested in getting the total number of species.

David Todd [00:53:05] Well, and what is the, I guess, distinction between your interest and Victor's interest in the diversity of birds that were being seen, versus Audubon's interest in getting a sheer count on population, on the numbers that were seen?

Ben Feltner [00:53:27] Well, numbers were important. I mean, I don't mean to denigrate the fact that that's what they were principally interested in. But, the finding of individual rarities was what drove a lot of people to come on a count. In other words, you don't want people to come on a count in an area where there are rare birds, then you could say in Alaska where people have gone on, I remember one bird count they had in Alaska where they birded all day long and didn't see any birds at all.

David Todd [00:54:13] So I guess there's an appeal..

Ben Feltner [00:54:17] That's an extreme case. But if you get far enough North and a raven doesn't fly over, you don't get any birds.

David Todd [00:54:33] So I guess part of the idea is that if you have this element of surprise, I guess, and delight of the bird that people don't see often, that, that's a real draw to get birders to come to your count. Is that maybe part of the idea?

Ben Feltner [00:54:54] I think that's partially it, yes. That and because the Freeport count had such a large number of people at times on it that they were drawn from parts of the country that didn't have the birds that were found in Texas at that time of year. They just wanted to come to be in Texas and bird Texas at that time of year.

Ben Feltner [00:55:24] And then there are, I knew one particular friend of mine was a newspaper owner, in I think it was Decatur, Indiana. He owned the paper, The Democrat, and his thing was he liked going to a number of counts and he would do a Christmas count on every day of the count period in different places. But he mostly liked to come to Texas.

David Todd [00:55:55] I guess because of, maybe the diversity, or that he you would be sure to see many different kinds of birds.

Ben Feltner [00:56:08] Well the highest counts in the U.S. have always been Texas and Florida, and close behind was California. So you get to those places to look. Arizona, where I live, is also good, but it's an inland count. There's no bays or seashores or anything like that here. So everything we get in Arizona pretty much is detailed to land birds, and a lot of Mexican species that are found, no further North than this area. This area where I live right now is, for instance, my hummingbird list for the yard this year was 10 species. In Texas, on the Freeport account, we would be lucky if we got three species of hummingbirds and unfortunately some years we didn't get any hummingbirds. That's just it.

David Todd [00:57:22] Right, right.

Ben Feltner [00:57:23] Also here in Arizona, we have trogons. Right now they're, well, not now, but a month ago, there were two species of trogons here and one, the elegant trogon is here all summer long in fairly good numbers, but nowhere else in the United States. They're in the canyons here. And this year we had eared quetzals too, which only come once every 10 years or so. And were just discovered in the, I think, the late 1980s, 1990s.

David Todd [00:58:12] Do you think this is a sign of climate change that you're seeing, these tropical birds further north?

Ben Feltner [00:58:21] Oh, climate change is so, it's, I don't know what you'd call it. It's virulent right now. My native country, England, for instance, is experiencing a number of subtropical herons that are now nesting there, that have never nested there before, that all of a sudden they started moving north in the summer to breed there.

Ben Feltner [00:58:57] And I think that's a point well taken. I think that birds keep showing up above the border here, that have been here only once or twice before, but are now getting to be regular - rufous-capped warblers is one of those. Probably a dozen places now where rufous-capped warblers nest in the United States. In the 1980s, there were none. So climate change is ... the deniers are out of their minds. I mean, it's definitely happening.

David Todd [00:59:45] It's interesting to see these signals of these sort of long-term, very subtle changes. But the birds, I guess, are also the litmus test. Is that right? Or what do you think?

Ben Feltner [01:00:00] Yes it is. Birds are migrating earlier. And in some places they're getting too early because the crops of insects that they needed to raise young are not yet ready. And they get there too early, so the populations decline because the food chain has changed. That's particularly been studied in Europe more than the U.S.

David Todd [01:00:40] As an observant person about birds, I'd be curious what you think about these kind of surprising die-outs of birds in New Mexico that I guess have happened this, this summer. What is your thought about that?

Ben Feltner [01:01:02] I think it's been correctly attributed to the smoke and ash in the air. It was coming from the California fires. I don't know for sure. I haven't seen the research on it. But that seems to be a very viable explanation, as it were. I've heard it spoken of. I haven't seen anything written on it. But we here in Arizona were, we had a week and a half to two weeks when the sky was full of, I guess you'd call it fly ash, smoke ash or whatever, and not normally like that at all here. So the skies weren't clear, and this is one of the cleanest areas in the U.S., as far as air is concerned.

David Todd [01:02:11] Extraordinary. Well, I'd be interested in, of course all that you've told me, but I'm intrigued by your wife and her very skilled depiction of many of the birds that you've witnessed over the years. And I was curious if you could talk a little bit about her contribution. I noticed that she painted some very beautiful watercolors of Eskimo curlews, and I was hoping that you could tell me a little bit about her career and her interests in the curlews like you.

Ben Feltner [01:02:55] I met Linda, oh, I was on tour in Texas and I remembered her from seeing some of her work and she was very enthusiastic about birds and I need a co-leader on a trip for one of the trips that I did and I asked her to come along. She turned out to be a very

good co-leader and was very knowledgeable about birds. But beyond that, she was a superb artist.

Ben Feltner [01:03:42] And we eventually got married.

Ben Feltner [01:03:49] When she found out about the Eskimo curlews, she decided she wanted pictures of them and she ended up, she was in the, I've forgotten the name of the society, forgive me, but she was the president of this, this National Society of Wildlife Artists. And they were holding their annual convention in Washington. And she went to the Smithsonian and mentioned to the bird lady there, the woman who was curator there, that I had found the Eskimo curlew in 1959. And she was so taken with that story, the curator was, whatever her name was, that she and Linda. She asked Linda or Linda asked her if there were any skins available and they gave her a free run of the Eskimo curlew skins that are in the Smithsonian Institution. And she spent a day there sketching and measuring and carrying everything she could find out about the Eskimo curlew from the skins that they had there. And that's where she got her models from, I guess you'd call that, except she had life when she painted it. They were of live birds not of skins. Anyway, that's the way she got into the Smithsonian's, I guess you'd call them catacombs, where they hide all their Eskimo curlew skins.

David Todd [01:05:53] Well, it is, it is so impressive that she, first of all, is so careful and thorough about measuring and then sort of logging all the details of these Eskimo curlews, but then to sort of reanimate them as, a, what looks like a very live bird, although I gather they're very, very rare and only a few, a handful of people like you, have actually seen them.

Ben Feltner [01:06:26] And she, she studied whimbrels in the field, and long-billed curlews . And well she studies everything, she sketches constantly. She's going up the canyon from here every day, not every day but every other day and sketching various things for portraits that she does. And she is extremely careful about getting things accurate. Each of her pictures usually has an insect or an arachnid or something in the picture. It's very small. But it's kind of her signature. And they will be deadly accurate as to having to be in that habitat with that bird or it's not in the picture. It's not just to put something pretty in there. It's just to put something that's supposed to be there. So if you look at her pictures very carefully, you'll notice that. She just finished one of a group of magpies flying. And I asked her when I, when I was looking at it, it was absolutely gorgeous. And I said, "You forgot to put an insect in there." She said, "No, I didn't." I looked very carefully. After all, I found it. And it was in the beak of one of the night jars. It was a specific grasshopper. Anyway, that's who she is. She's very careful, very accurate. And extremely talented.

David Todd [01:08:07] Well, and I understand that she has put her talents to conservation, this Silent Skies Mural, that I think some of her curlew illustrations have joined, is a wonderful idea.

Ben Feltner [01:08:24] Yeah, she was a part of that. That, what they asked her to do some pictures for it. There are other artists involved in that, too. She actually, incidentally, she's just finished illustrating a book for Texas Tech. That was written by B.C. Robison about the Texas coast and its birds. I think it just, it just came out of Texas Tech Press. I've forgotten the title of it, but the author is B.C. Robison.

David Todd [01:09:08] Great. Well, I'll have to look that up. And then I guess another sort of connection between art and birds I've been intrigued by - your sighting of the Eskimo curlew

has been marked by a sculpture by Todd McGrain. It's now standing on Galveston Island. And I was curious if you could tell us a little bit about that.

Ben Feltner [01:09:37] I was invited to that but because of the coronavirus, I decided it was not healthy for me to fly on a plane and the people that invited us, decided that too, because of my age. And what I thought about it? I thought it was a wonderful idea. But they put it in a park that I'm not familiar with. I haven't lived in Houston since 1984, so my visits to Galveston, have not been even annual. It's in a new park and the thing that I don't understand is it's sort of sitting away by his itself somewhere. Maybe, probably give it the effect of loneliness, of being gone, or something. But habitat is not quite right. It's, it's right for people, but it's not where the curlews were when we saw them. They were in short grass fields, apparently, they, they decided to put it in a park, and the park is on the bay, or on the Gulf, I think. But I think it's a wonderful idea. And I've seen pictures of the other sculptures that the man has done, or woman. I don't know if that's the case, but they are all really super and really good ideas.

Ben Feltner [01:11:25] I wasn't very enthused about having to go as a sort of guest speaker to that event and then having not able to go was very disappointing.

David Todd [01:11:42] Yes, so much upheaval in the last six months. Well, this might be a place to sort of wind down. I'm curious what your really extraordinary experience with the Eskimo curlew has taught you about rare birds, endangered birds, even extinct birds. So any sort of takeaway lesson you've taken from that?

Ben Feltner [01:12:13] Lessons?

David Todd [01:12:22] Yes!

Ben Feltner [01:12:22] Vote environmentally! We need help. We need lots of help. There's problems all over the world. This is not just specific to the United States. We're in danger of losing lots of species all over the world and more in the U.S. There are a number of birds, right now, that are in danger here. Cerulean warblers are collapsing. Many birds are, their numbers are just collapsing, in sheer volume in the last 20 years.

David Todd [01:13:04] And these were birds that were originally pretty common, and no longer?

Ben Feltner [01:13:18] Case in point is the cerulean warbler. When I lived in Texas, I used to see great numbers of them in the spring every year. And the last three times I've been in Texas, I've looked specifically for them and not seen one. They are still being seen there. Not in any flock numbers at all. Just one here, one there. So, I don't know what's happening to them, besides deforestation. There's a lot of things involved, I'm sure. And this whole environmental change. They're not hunted. So, I just know that climate change is going to destroy a lot of species. Not only of birds, but other things. Unless we start putting the brakes on, it's going to get even worse. I'm 86, I won't see it. But, my great grandchildren may be lucky to ever see a cerulean warbler.

David Todd [01:14:46] That's very troubling and sobering. You know, I was struck by your affection, and interest, passion for birds and one of the things that that tickled me, I, I read your chapter about the bluejay, which is, you know, a common bird, but you saw a great value in it and talked about it and I see that blue jay as part of your email address even. And I was

curious if you could talk about what it is that you enjoy about the blue jay and maybe birds in general?

Ben Feltner [01:15:28] Well, blue jays in particular causes belong to the crow family. And the crow family, along with parrots, are probably the most intelligent birds. Ravens are the biggest member of the crow family. And blue jays to me, are the most beautiful. But, the Crows, my license plate is "CORVID", and it's because of I admire that whole family, because not only are many of them are extremely beautiful, but they're all very intelligent. And intelligence, in nature, has nothing to do with immediate brain size. Chickadees are much smarter than some other larger animals. And they have little tiny brains but size of a peanut, or less, actually. And they're very, very bright. They know how to do things and they know how to figure out things. And jays and crows are, they're just like, you're in danger of being outsmarted if you try to outsmart one.

Ben Feltner [01:17:01] I remember a long time ago I read a little book by Vance Packer called Animal Intelligence or Animal IQ. And it had some surprising revelations in there. This has nothing to do with birds but the one I remember most was a group of scientists were testing a chimpanzee, and he put a banana, suspended it from the ceiling and they put a box and stick in this room, wondering how long it would take for the chimpanzee to stand on the box and knock the banana down with a stick. Well, when the chimp entered the room, it went immediately, picked up the stick and pole vaulted up and grabbed the banana. They were expecting it to stand on the box, which would be the human thing to do. It just, that kind of thing just gets to me. And birds can do that, too. They can fool you.

David Todd [01:18:13] Isn't that wonderful? Well, this surprise and delight that animals can get you. Well, you've been so kind to spend this time with us and I just wanted to close by asking you if there's anything you want to add about Eskimo curlews or about your life with birds, otherwise.

Ben Feltner [01:18:41] I guess I'm happy that I've had such a long life and was able to spend it, almost all of it, with birds. More than anything else, the fact that I, with birds and bird-loving people, naturalists other than birders are my friends. We have a couple of friends that are insect people and others that are dragonfliers. And they all are of the same mind. We all know what's happening. And we all are hoping for the best.

Ben Feltner [01:19:27] Other than that I've just been very, very fortunate. I lived through Hitler's bombing. I was in service during the Korean War, and never had to experience anything other than sitting at a desk. And I've just been very, very lucky, very fortunate. If I died tomorrow, I would have had a great, great life.

Ben Feltner [01:19:58] And I'm so glad I got to find the Eskimo curlew. It's my single great moment in life. I guess everybody is famous for what, fifteen minutes? Isn't that what Warhol said? I'm thinking of somebody like that. I don't know. Anyway, that's about it.

Ben Feltner [01:20:20] Well, and Linda is one of the most wonderful people in the world.

David Todd [01:20:26] Well, it shows and thank you for sharing your love of the natural world and your lovely wife as well. And I certainly appreciate your time today. Thank you so much.

Ben Feltner [01:20:40] You're very welcome. And look for that book.

David Todd [01:20:44] Yes, I will.

Ben Feltner [01:20:45] B.C. Robison is the author. I've forgotten the title. And it's Texas Tech book

David Todd [01:20:53] And I will look for the little arachnids and other insects in the drawings and paintings.

Ben Feltner [01:21:02] OK. Do that.

David Todd [01:21:02] Thank you. Thank you for that clue.

Ben Feltner [01:21:05] OK. Cheerio.

Ben Feltner [01:21:09] Be safe.

David Todd [01:21:10] Yes, you too. Bye now.