

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Rose Ann Rowlett

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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

David Todd [00:00:04] This is David Todd.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:00:05] Hi, David, how are you?

David Todd [00:00:08] I'm fine. Thank you. So nice of you to call.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:00:13] You're welcome.

David Todd [00:00:17] I hope that you're having a good day. And thanks for spending a little time with me to explain some of, you know, your many interests and experiences. And I want you to know we really appreciate it.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:00:33] Well, you're welcome. Yeah, it's a beautiful day in Portal and I have windows all about that I can look out and talk to you at the same time.

David Todd [00:00:44] Well, well, good. Well, I guess I should explain a little bit about what we're about here.

David Todd [00:00:52] You may have gathered some of the kind of reasons for what we're trying to do, but let me explain once more, maybe in more detail so that we've got it as a record. The thought here is that we would record this interview for research and educational work for the Conservation History Association of Texas, a nonprofit, and for a book and a Web site that the Association is building for Texas A&M University Press. And then finally, as a contribution to an archive about environmental history that we have at the Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas at Austin. So that's, that's our plan for what we might do with the recording with you. But we wanted you to understand that plan and also to know that if you, for any reason, wanted to use the recording, of course, it's yours as well.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:02:00] OK, that's fine.

David Todd [00:02:02] Oh good, good.

David Todd [00:02:05] Well, you know what that is, this is as a sort of background on this. How about if we just get started and I'll try to give a little bit of context for when and where.

David Todd [00:02:20] It is November 16th, 2020. My name is David Todd. I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I'm in Austin. And we are conducting an

interview with Rose Ann Rowlett, who is an accomplished birder and nature guide. And she is based in Portal, Arizona. And this interview is being done by telephone.

David Todd [00:02:45] And we'll talk about a number of things, but I think we'll focus on her sighting of the Eskimo curlew back in the 50s and the 60s and then also maybe touch on some general issues about birding and nature study and conservation as well.

David Todd [00:03:08] My, my first question would be if you could perhaps tell us a little bit about how you first got interested in nature and in birds in particular. I mean, maybe there were some early experiences or a mentor you might want to tell us about.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:03:23] Yeah, I actually had a second grade school teacher when I was aged seven. It was Miss Mink and she was at Casis school in Austin, Texas, and did a unit on nature. And she assigned each kid different aspects to research. And she gave, there was a poster for the hall that had... Arm and Hammer baking soda used to have little cards and she collected a whole bunch of these. They had paintings by Fuertes of birds and she had cut off the names of the birds on them, but she had pasted them around the border of this big posterboard. And my particular assignment was to take this beautiful field guide she loaned me and use it to identify the birds and label it for the poster.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:04:23] And the, the book was, was the Richard Pough's 1949 edition of the Audubon Land Bird Guide. Had beautiful illustrations by Don Eckelberry. And so I loved looking through it and figuring out what the birds were. And I don't remember exactly whether she gave me the book or my parents got me one or something. But, but I took, I got to take it home and I showed it to my brother. And both of us were just enchanted by all the diversity of color and form in all these birds.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:05:03] And and then shortly thereafter, in fact, we were walking home from school and it was springtime and there was an oak tree right outside the school where we saw this beautiful black and orange bird. And we didn't know what it was, but we'd seen it in the book. And we ran all the way home a couple of miles to get to the book and get to that and figured out it was the Baltimore oriole.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:05:35] And, and so that's sort of how we got started. We built on it from there. My parents gave us some opera glasses, which we had to share for a little while, and that didn't work out so well. And so they eventually bought us each a pair of little binoculars and we started birding our neighborhood, usually by bicycle and on foot. And we lived in a part of Austin, in Tarrytown, you probably know it, where there were lots of trees and it was good for migration and there were quite a few resident birds as well. And so it was a fun place to grow up looking at birds.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:06:21] But it wasn't until sometime later, a few years later, when a neighbor who was, who knew of our interest, got in touch with us and told us about Travis Audubon Society field trip that she had read about in the newspaper, that was just not very far, it was like within six or seven miles of our house, but it was outside of our bicycle range. And we talked my father into taking us on it, and it turned out to be a major life-changing event.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:07:02] We, it was in September and it was just to the Colorado River. That was before Town Lake, before the dam was built. And so it was still river there below the lower bridge. And we saw spoonbills and all kinds of birds that - a whole bunch of lifers. The

trip was led by Fred Webster and, and it was life-changing. He taught us how to make the call of the, of an Eastern screech owl, how to whistle like a screech owl, which we practiced until we got fairly good at in order to call in little birds. And I remember, in fact, a ruby-crowned kinglet landing on my head one time when I was doing my screech owl call.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:08:01] And anyway, we, Fred and his wife, Marie Webster, started taking us out on Travis Audubon Society field trips. And, and even when there was no field trip, we would go with them on weekends. And they took us out most every weekend for several years that, we'll see, that was, that was the beginning and it was through the Travis Audubon Society field trips and in Fred and Mary, that we met the other people who would be instrumental in forming our interests and maintaining great friendships.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:08:55] And Edgar Kincaid would become our real mentor and Frank Oatman would become a best friend and the three of us, he was four years older and so he already had his driver's license by the time we met him, and that gave us a certain amount of independence because we could go with him pretty much any time and anywhere we wanted. And we could go birding after school and get around to various places that we hadn't been able to before. And, and we, I mean, it's interesting that the three of us became known as the "eager beavers" by the Audubon Society people locally. And we continued birding for a long time together, but also with Audubon Society people and got to know them.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:09:55] So we owe a lot to the Travis Audubon Society people that helped us in those early days. And but then Edgar was the one, Edgar Kincaid, the cassowary, was the one who first introduced us to the neotropics. And he was, he had a major influence on our life. You know, as we would go south into Mexico at Christmas vacations, my parents would let us go with him. He...

David Todd [00:10:31] I may have lost the signal. Can you hear me, Rose Ann?

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:10:35] I can hear you.

David Todd [00:10:37] OK, maybe we just had a little gap there, but why don't you resume? You were telling us about going with Edgar Kincaid into the tropics, in Mexico?

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:10:47] Yeah, he was the one that introduced us to the neotropics. We started going to Mexico with him in 1960, Christmas vacations, when my parents would let us go for the whole vacation off with him to Mexico. And so that just blew our minds getting to neotropical birds, so many of them, so rich. It was, it was incredible. And we, our first trip, we did a Rio Corona and El Salto Falls and then as far south as Huehuetla and then every year we did another. Next year we did, went to Cuernavaca and Mexico City and Cuernavaca, and then we did western Mexico.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:11:44] There were major wonderful trips where we recorded every thing as we went along. Every - the first grass tree, the first pine tree: we became real habit birders under Edgar's influence and, and careful observers that took notes. I started, we started well, we had already started taking notes for a few years of things that we'd seen around our yard and neighborhood. But we started taking incredibly detailed notes with that, under Edgar's influence. And we would end up, of course, working with him on the Bird Life of Texas for years to come. But that was sort of how we got started.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:12:34] And, you had asked if we had any particular teachers besides my second, second grade school teacher, it's funny because I had a high school counselor sometime later on who actually tried to discourage me from going into ornithology. She, she tried to, to tell me that there were no jobs for women in that line of business and that it's, and furthermore, it was a very Victorian advice that if you decide to work in something that you already love your profession, you'll, you'll lose your love for it. It'll become such a, such a work.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:13:33] And of course, that's exactly the opposite of the way I ended up feeling and thinking.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:13:40] But so Miss Mink was the major influence in getting me started.

David Todd [00:13:48] Very early!

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:13:50] Very early.

David Todd [00:13:50] You know, it's interesting to me that it seems like a lot of your introduction and education was, was almost like an apprenticeship, you know, with the Websters and with Mr. Kincaid, and that it was something that was maybe outside of a formal education, was...

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:14:13] Absolutely, yeah.

David Todd [00:14:14] . on your own time, on your own interest.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:14:16] Right. Yeah. Yeah. No, very, I mean, I loved the biology classes and, you know, I loved school, actually, but I couldn't wait to go birding after school. We even had, when, a little before we met the Audubon Society people, there were a few years there where our neighborhood had, we got some other kids in the neighborhood interested in birds by forming a little club with my brother and I and another, Jerry Wantanger formed a little club. And I remember we had a cigar box and people, other kids in the neighborhood, could become a member of the club for a nickel in the cigar box. And they had to pass the test of being able to identify every bird pictured in under "Bird" in the Encyclopedia Britannica Junior, which had birds from all over the world illustrated in it, you know, so they had to memorize them all. But they did it! I mean, we became a little club of, I don't know, six or seven kids that roamed the neighborhood together every now and then and looked at birds that.

David Todd [00:15:44] But yes,.

David Todd [00:15:45] A high bar!

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:15:45] We were. Yeah. Yeah, I know it was funny looking back. But we were very fortunate to have the, like you say, kind of an apprenticeship under first the Websters and then Edgar Kincaid. And to have the companionship, I was so lucky to have my brother, you know, to ... because in those days birding was not looked upon like it is today as a perfectly normal, acceptable, wonderful behavior. It was thought of as something crazy.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:16:24] And I remember being outed one time in a, I think it was, my fourth grade, fourth or fifth grade classroom when it had, it had windows at Casis school. And

you could see out to where a lone dead tree where an American kestrel flew into this tree and it was so close to the building that it caught everybody's attention in this classroom. And then our teacher misidentified it and I spoke up and said, no, that's, that's a Sparrow hawk, which is what it was called in those days. And everybody turned. And I said, I must have said it with great authority and explained why it was a Sparrow hawk and not whatever it was she had called it. And everybody turned and looked at me like some queer, you know, person, who only a bird nut would know that.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:17:34] And we even used to sometimes hide in the bushes on Sunday mornings when other kids are going to church. And we were out birding in the park.

David Todd [00:17:46] But the culture and the attitudes changed so much.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:17:50] And then, yeah, for the better.

David Todd [00:17:52] I would say so. Yeah, sure. Absolutely. Well tell us about, I guess, later years. So you, you do get a degree, formal graduate degrees, as I understand it.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:18:10] OK, well I, I accepted the advice of that high school counselor and decided not to go into ornithology at the time. So I majored in botany at the University of Texas - Austin, and got a degree in botany and then went off to graduate school at University of Washington in botany. And but somewhere along the way, maybe partly, partly because of a love affair that didn't work out, but partly because of figuring out that lab work and botany was not, not my ideal kind of occupation, I decided to work on birds, after all.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:19:04] And I ended up eventually going to Cal State Hayward and working with Howard Cogswell, getting a master's, working on birds. So I did eventually come back to birds formally. But I never, I never finished a, I never did a Ph.D. and it, when I was finishing my master's thesis, in the Bay Area was right about the time that the Bird Life of Texas was needing its final editing, and I had worked on the Bird Life of Texas with Edgar Kincaid during my college years while I was at U.T., but mostly by birding under-birded counties and working on the bibliography. And my brother, John, was working as a co-editor with Edgar on the bird book, and he was needing to leave Austin. He was planning to go to graduate school at University of Virginia. And he, he really needed to leave before he finished editing the book. So they asked me to come back from California and finish editing the bird book with Edgar and Suzanne Winkler, who was also helping Edgar edit. And so University of Texas Press hired me then to come back. And so I just as I finished my thesis, I moved back to Austin to help finish the Bird Life of Texas and that took another, I don't know, a year and a half or something like that. It was published in '74.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:21:16] And, and so and that's how I met Suzanne Winkler, the other assistant editor, through University of Texas Press, through Edgar, and we hit it off and we started living together in Austin. We shared an apartment. And Frank Oatman ("Poncho") was away, he had he was in the military for a while and, and was out of Austin. He had also worked on the Bird Life of Texas and editing, and he came back to help, too. And so the three of us then live together, Suzanne and Poncho and I, while we finished editing The Bird Life of Texas with Edgar and it and then it came out in '74. And so, and yeah, that, that kind of concluded one phase of, of my history there.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:22:34] It was after that, that Frank was living in northern Vermont and started leading tours for Questers Tours and Travel, and Alan Griffith and I, my husband

at the time, decided to move to northern Vermont and live with Frank and John and and Questers wanted me to start leading tours for them through Frank's recommendation, which is what I did. And we were, together, working on restoring an old house, rebuilding an old, beautiful old house in northern Vermont near, it was near Greensboro, north of Greensboro, and, and Vermont was totally different for me, too, it was the north country and snowy winters and all. But although I will say many of them, I was gone south to the tropics guiding at the time. So I missed the northern lights that people saw while I was gone. Anyway.

David Todd [00:23:57] Well that's fascinating, I mean, it seems like there's this train of your life from, you know, very early days of your life in the field, whether you were in the bushes Sunday mornings or out birding along the Colorado River and then birding these less-trafficked counties for the Bird Life of Texas. And then still later in the tropics for Questers. You know, I would love to hear you talk about one particular birding trip, which I guess happened in in 1959 down on Galveston Island. And maybe you can tell the story of when you saw this very rare, maybe extinct bird.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:24:45] Well, actually, the one that we saw was in 1962. Ours was the last one that ...

David Todd [00:24:53] Oh, my apologies. 1962. All right.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:24:53] ...was alive. All right. Yeah, it was March, March 28th, 25th, 1962, and it was the, the fourth year in a row that the Eskimo curlew had been found on Galveston Island. Ben Feltner had found the first one with Dudley Deaver back in '59 and, and people had seen them in the intervening years, each spring on Galveston. And the one we saw was the first one that had turned up in 1962. It was found by Jerry and Nancy Strickland on March 24th. And our friend Victor Emanuel gave us a call when he had heard about it. And Frank and John and I jumped at the opportunity to rush to Galveston the next day and drove down early and met Victor and, and started looking for the bird. And it was about nine miles west of Galveston and in some fields that were cattle fields with short grass. And we started birding and we found it about 11 o'clock. We were the first people there that day to find it. And it was with, it was in a field with long curlews and some whimbrels. And we got fantastic looks at it.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:26:41] And the thing is, in the background to all this, I had read, we had all read, Fred Bodsworth's wonderful little book, *The Last of the Curlews*, and that book had had a major impression on me. I mean, I cried at the end of it and all, and Fred Bodsworth was a naturalist who had a real gift for writing too. It was a story, you probably know the book. Have you read it?

David Todd [00:27:20] I have, yes.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:27:22] Yeah. It's wonderful, wonderfully written story of the last surviving male Eskimo curlew that migrated with equally fast-flying golden plovers in migration south. But he wasn't finding a female on his breeding grounds in Arctic Canada, and year after year he would make his migration. And this followed a year in the life, in his life. And you know that it would fly way to the east, to Labrador and in the fall where it would stock up on crowberries, fatten up and then fly across the Atlantic Ocean to South America all the way to the pampas of Argentina, to winter in the grasslands there and then in, and end up in the fictionalized story that Bodsworth related, he actually meets a female curlew there and they start migrating back north together. They cross the Andes. They go up across Yucatan

and come to the Texas coast and up through the Great Plains. But when they stop in one of the grassy prairies of the Great Plains they're following a plow and, and, and the farmer shoots the female, well he shoots at them, shot them and, and the female dies eventually. And, and so the male, then he hangs around for a while, he gets shot at again and stuff. Eventually he flies on to his, to his spring breeding grounds, you know, always in hopes of finding another female. But, but then, and the story kind of ends.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:29:48] And it's just, you know, it has that, even now, it has a major effect on me.

David Todd [00:30:03] Oh, it's so poignant.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:30:06] It is, it's the sad, sad old. Can I put you down for just a minute?

David Todd [00:30:14] Absolutely.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:30:37] Yes, sorry about that. Anyway, it, it has to be brought back that William Beebe quote, "the beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived, though its first material expression be destroyed; a vanished harmony, may yet again inspire the composer. But when the last individual of a race of living beings breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again."

David Todd [00:31:30] No. It's, it's such a touching, moving thing. And the finality of it, the loss is, you know, just crushing.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:31:42] It is.

David Todd [00:31:44] And I am so glad that you got to see the curlew and that seems like the one silver lining is that you were one of the lucky ones to say goodbye.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:31:55] And we were aware that this is probably one of the rarest birds that we'd ever see, if not the rarest. I mean, since then, I have seen, I saw the, some of the last Atitlan grebes that are now extinct when I used to lead tours to Guatemala and we used to go out on the boat and see them. And, and I've looked for some of the last, a rare macaw in in Brazil. That was where I was just a year or two late. They'd seen it the year before, actually, I think that they'd seen it a month or two before.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:32:38] But anyway, all this, it was in that background that I came to tour-leading, you know, that the, what it takes for people to care is to first fall in love with the, it take the familiarity and then learning about them. It was kind of an increasing realization that commitment to protecting things begins with caring, and that caring stems from love, no matter how simple its beginnings.

David Todd [00:33:33] And I guess rooted in all your understanding and familiarity with them in that you really studied these birds and like you said their, not only their color and their form, but their habitat. I mean, to you, it seems like that you had this very strong base of understanding birds and then, and then loving them as well.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:33:58] We did. We did. We were so fortunate that Edgar had, had so installed, instilled that in us.

David Todd [00:34:08] Mm hmm. You know, one thing that I found is, is curious, and I'm wondering if you would have some insights about it, in that that Eskimo curlews had this run of sightings from '59 to, what, '63, or '62, but it had these big gaps, you know, that the previous time maybe was seen in the mid '40s by Joe Heiser.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:34:40] Right.

David Todd [00:34:40] And there was another gap, even longer, before that. Why do you think it was so seldom seen.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:34:50] Oh I'm not at all surprised at that because, I mean, there were really very few birders in Texas over all at the time and, and around the country, even still small, and especially in the Canadian Arctic and all, where they would be on breeding grounds. There were, there were, by then, the birds were rare and, and the chances of encountering small numbers of Eskimo curlews just seemed very small. There weren't enough birders out birding and especially birders who, you know, would be looking for Eskimo curlews, who knew them. And I mean, it was, it was not a big network in those days. It was sort of a network of, you know, maybe a few dozen people around the state who had a limited connection to each other, mostly by phone. And who had huge - Texas is huge, and all of the areas in between.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:36:15] And of course the, the late 1890s and all, when they were clearing all the, converting everything to farm fields in the Great Plains, that didn't help. I mean that, there were so many threats to the bird that and there were so relatively few of them left, that it doesn't surprise me that that they weren't seen for huge gaps.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:36:46] And then once they were found again, then people knew where to look for them and targeted, you know, birding like Galveston after, after, after '59, when it was found in Galveston, when Ben found it, then, you know, people birded there each year looking for them. But before that, it was just a needle in a haystack. Nobody was lucky.

David Todd [00:37:18] How well you touched on something that I'd love to hear your views on. This Eskimo curlew, from what I've read, was a very numerous bird at its peak and then had this precipitous fall. And you mentioned the farming and conversion of some of these Great Plains prairies as maybe one of the factors in this decline. Could you talk a little bit about why this bird could have declined so quickly and so dramatically?

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:37:56] Well, I think overhunting was a big part of it because the birds came through - there were millions of them. Apparently, it was one of the commonest birds in North America at one point. And, but there were problems when, when grants were given for people to, to develop property as farmland through the Midwest and then out into the Great Plains. And they started planting cropland.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:38:30] And then they had these invasions of of Rocky Mountain locusts, too. And the curlews love the locusts. In fact, one of the food staples for them in their northward migration through the Great Plains for grasshoppers from their their, you know, grub, their, their larvae. And, and there were major efforts made to eliminate the Rocky Mountain grasshopper because it was so destructive to crops and these huge swarms would come and, and threaten whole, a whole season of crops for farmers. More and more farmers were developing lands. And there were, there were targeted efforts. And the Rocky Mountain

grasshopper was eventually driven to extinction. And so a huge food supply there was lost. There are other grasshoppers and other grubs and things that that they ate, too.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:39:42] But, but, but then they were also just such a flocking bird that and they seem to, to come to, like if one bird was down, other birds would come and join it. It's an interesting behavior of some flocking birds that they don't, they're not shy about, even when there's a threat, like a farmer shooting at them. Or and there were times when, when people could go out and club them to death, actually, I mean, it was, it was very sad what people did. Hunting, hunting was stopped, you know, but it wasn't until 1912 or 1914, sometime around then that, that laws started limiting hunting like that. And, and before then, there were masses. There were, they were eaten for, in huge numbers. They were sold. They were sometimes, they were just clubbed and abandoned, like there were so many of them. And they were, they were fattened up and they took, they took the freshest ones to eat and just left the others. I mean, it was disastrous what the hunters did to diminish the population.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:41:12] And then in addition, at the same time, the habitat was being diminished by conversion to farmland and then the grasshoppers being eliminated to some extent.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:41:26] And so there were lots of factors going on, but I think those were probably the main ones over hunting and, and cultivation, and then the fact that we, we were targeting grasshoppers as a terrible locust population problem.

David Todd [00:42:00] So it really just took maybe removing a couple of links in the chain of migration and the bird, I guess, has had a multi-thousand mile route, but the changes in the, in the Great Plains, in those farm fields might have been had a really big impact, is that what you are thinking.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:42:25] I think so. I mean, it happened all the way up through Saskatchewan, you know, all the way up through Canada, through the Great Plains. So much of that, I mean, there's hardly any habitat left for them in migration. And that's a major factor, and then plus we use pesticides and, you know, we, we have all kinds of impacts on the environment. I mean, nowadays, it's hard to say what we're doing right now, you know, with, with our not only, not only of the habitat conversion and pesticide targeting, but also now with global warming and, you know, there are a million things that birds have to deal with. And it does seem that bird populations overall are declining and, and insect populations are declining, which is, is a major food source for birds. And people don't understand exactly why general insect populations worldwide seem to be diminishing so rapidly.

David Todd [00:43:48] Well, you know, I would love to understand what you think about not only the Eskimo curlew, but also maybe other shorebirds that it shares a migration route or habitat needs or, you know, feeding patterns. Is it a good teacher maybe about what other shorebirds might be facing now? Have you seen some connections that we should focus on?

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:44:29] Well, I think.

David Todd [00:44:32] There, you're back. I think I had a little gap there. Maybe just start your answer once again.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:44:40] I think the environmental impacts that we have in all kinds of ways are affecting various, and it's not just shorebirds, it's land birds, little land birds too. It's

migration. It's, it's timing. It's, you know, it's, it's the dowitcher populations in the Chesapeake Bay. It's the over-hunting, over-fishing. I mean, it's just the plastics in the ocean. I mean, there are albatrosses, you know, that are dying with stomachs full of plastic and. I mean, it's, it's rampant and it's everywhere and I think mankind needs to create an impact on the earth, and it's only through, to learning more about, about these things that people will care enough to do something about it.

David Todd [00:46:05] Oh. Maybe you can also talk to some about the years since I guess the last confirmed sighting of the Eskimo curlew, understand, was in '63, but there have been these suspected, putative yeah, the sightings.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:46:29] Our '62 sighting was the last of the sightings by birders and the one in 1963 in Barbados was shot by a hunter there. And so the specimen was recovered and definitely an Eskimo curlew. And that just was by fluke that it turned up that that a, an ornithologist found out about it because it was a hunter that shot it. And after that, it was not seen again on the Texas coast, except, or not documented again.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:47:09] Now, there've been a number of other, you know, records, lots of them actually, in some in Texas and some and other parts. And some of them sound real good. And I know some of the observers and, you know, I would tend to trust them. And yet these days, when there's so many birders and they all have cameras and microphones and stuff, I mean, it's hard to believe that nobody's been able to document one since 1963. So I, I'm skeptical about that. But you know that there was one report of 23 Eskimo curlews on a little island, spoil Island, and those are by two biologists, U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists that I know that are good, good birders and know whimbrels. And, you know, to me, that was encouraging. It was like and that was a little island that nobody can get to, generally, you have to go by boat and stuff. So I don't think anybody else was able to go look for 'em again or, you know, cover that island.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:48:39] And, that, you know, there might be a few of them still out there still surviving because the Canadian Arctic, where they breed, it's enormous, it's huge. And I know people have looked for them there. But when I've spent time in Arctic habitat, boy, you have to walk the whole, you know, it's, it's an enormous feat to cover the expanse of area that they used to breed in, I you know, I'm not convinced that they're gone for good, but who knows? I'd like to think that there might be a few still out there.

David Todd [00:49:32] That is a good a good belief and, you know, like you said at the outset, it's always been like finding a needle in a haystack for the last set of decades. So, maybe some persist out there.

David Todd [00:49:51] So I was curious what your outlook is on ways that folks are trying to memorialize the bird, whether it's extinct, or just very rare. But just to try to bring more attention to the fact that this bird, certainly in its big numbers, is no more. And, you know, there's this monument down in Galveston, I'm sure you're aware of.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:50:19] Yeah.

David Todd [00:50:20] How do you how do you recognize a bird like this?

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:50:26] Well, I think I like Todd McGrain's efforts at sculptures of these giant sculptures of extinct birds. I think that, I think that's a wonderful way to bring people's attention to the plight of some of these species. And artistic stuff is fabulous to do that.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:50:56] We were invited to go to the installation ceremony of that in, at Galveston and I was sorry because of covid it got canceled and so we didn't get to go. It would have been fun to see other people again that had that were going to be there, too, and to meet Todd McGrain. And, and yet so I've seen the pictures of his, his curlew and the installation on Galveston Island, and all the rest of his big sculptures which are installed near the place, you know, that they were last seen. And, and that I think that's great. Art work, art work can make a lasting impression on people and it's a fascination with and love for natural critters that's prerequisite to saving them. And any way you can do that is good.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:51:59] My, my sweetheart, my Richard Webster, my husband, knowing my history with the Eskimo curlew, he gave me a surprise birthday present a few years back of the original painting by Linda Feltner, Ben Feltner's wife, who's a wonderful artist who lives in Hereford, Arizona. And, and she did a fabulous, very well researched painting of the Eskimo curlew, which now hangs in our living room. And even had Richard had the print number one of it, he bought that too, to give to my brother so that that we each have an Eskimo curlew hanging on our walls now. And, and Linda sells prints through Artists for Conservation Festival on an online site, and that, most of that money goes to conservation efforts. And, you know, I love this, the artistic approach and the way that artists have gotten behind conservation efforts for rare birds. And I think that every little bit helps.

David Todd [00:53:28] Well, it seems like all in a vein with your own life that these drawings, paintings and sculptures, you know, help connect people with wildlife, with birds. And I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about your own efforts. I mean, you worked as a nature guide yourself for decades. And I think you mentioned your, some of your first work with Questers. Talk some about some of your birding experiences with VENT and Field Guides that came later.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:54:08] Yeah, I started with Questers and worked with them for a few years when I was living in Vermont and they were based in New York. They were, they were, they kind of had inherited Crowder Nature Tours when Crowder died and Michael Parkin was the, the head of Questers and, and Frank had started guiding for him and recommended me. And these were general natural history tours and I loved them. Although I, it over a couple of years, I discovered that they attract, they attract such a variety of people that some of them, you know, we would go to Mayan ruins and a trip that included Mayan ruins would include a few people who were interested in archeology, only, a few people who were interested in the birds, a few people are interested in the botany of the area. And I was interested in all of that, of course. But to, to guide the trip, one, one finally came to realize that the birders were interested in everything, for the most part, whereas the archeology types were not necessarily interested in birds or plants, and the botanists weren't necessarily interested in birds or archeology. And so I tended to enjoy the trips that had more birders on them.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:55:59] And it was shortly after that that my brother and Victor formed Victor Emanuel Nature Tours and started that company and they invited me to join them. And so I did and worked with Victor Emanuel Nature Tour for, I don't know, 10 years or something like that. And, and then eventually formed, I was one of the founders of Field Guides Inc., which is altogether, I guess I, I led tours for 40 years now, which is amazing. But most of them

were like a couple of weeks at a time, sometimes a little bit longer, sometimes shorter, closer ones were generally a little bit shorter. And and the the longer ones were up to the neotropics.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:56:56] I started doing it mostly in the neotropics. That's where Edgar had given us such a good foundation and where so little was known that even though compared to nowadays, we had limited knowledge of, of birds in Mexico and in parts south, we still knew a lot more than, than anybody else with the Christmas counts with Edgar and every Christmas in Mexico and for years. And so, and, and also they depended, Edgar was an ear birder, too. He'd gotten us very attuned to birding by ear and neotropical birds were primarily, I mean, you find them by hearing them for the most part, unless you're in a marshland or something, you know, in an open water bird area.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:58:14] Forest birds, you locate them by call and so that had been a passion for me for, from early on. And so I guess I was one of the few early people using oh, I had a Dan Gibson parabola and was recording bird song and playing it back to call the bird in and figure out what it was, back when we didn't know what most of these calls were. And so we were learning quickly and we used that on tours too and for many years through Mexico and then Trinidad and Guatemala and then into South America and then eventually pretty much worldwide we ended up guiding trips. I ended up guiding trips all over the world, every continent.

Rose Ann Rowlett [00:59:18] And, and, and one of my big projects now, in retirement, is to finish processing and uploading all of my lifetime of recordings that I had contributed to a number of them to Cornell early on, but eventually ran out of time doing all the guiding and trips and all that go with it. I didn't have time to keep, keep up with that. And so I have years worth of original recordings. Some of them, some of them were some of the first recordings of, known, of any of the species, and some of them led to new species being named. And, and so I'm trying to process all of those now. And nowadays to contribute to Cornell, where I contributed all my early ones, you have to get through eBird. And so it got me into eBird. And so now I'm using eBird and I'm going back and adding my recordings and along with the lists from past trips. And that will take that'll take the rest of my life.

David Todd [01:00:46] It sounds like it's just a voluminous amount of both work and recordings. And, and when you submit these recordings, do you, how do you describe them? And, you know, I guess certainly you give it a name and a date and the place. Is there more about the habitat or, you know, if this is a meeting call or alarm call or what?

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:01:12] Yeah. You annotate it at the time, right after you make the recording, you annotate it to, to what you know, what you can tell about what the behavior of the bird is and and where it's calling from, how high in the tree, etc. you know, all the details that you can come up with. Sometimes you're recording birds you can't see at all. You don't even know where they're calling from, your just general direction in the forest, you know. And so, so, so some of them are, have limited additional information. But then if you play it back and the bird comes in and you can at least identify it and add that kind of information. And so, so you annotate those at the time, right after you record the bird. And then when you do your eBird list, you have a list of all the species you saw at that spot and including all the background. Oh, yeah, you annotate the background species that you identified there, too. And, and then they'll all be on that eBird list. And so then you, and you process it and then have to upload it to the Cornell Web site, to the eBird checklist.

David Todd [01:02:38] How wonderful. It's like you're being a virtual bird guide now. The songs will live on and touch so many people.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:02:48] Well they, they are useful, especially for researchers who are doing comparative phylogenies and, you know, trying to figure out a geographic variation and calls and, and the number of behavioral studies.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:03:07] And Richard, my husband, contributes to Xeno-Canto and we record together a lot nowadays since we're both retired. We do a lot of original recording together. And I figure since he's doing Xeno-Canto, I'll continue to do Cornell, but his are, he's processed a lot more than I have and kept up with it better through the years. And so his are all available or you know, a lot of them are available on Xeno-Canto. He's a bird guide with Field Guides to, or has been but now he's retired. So, so his are available. You can, anybody can listen to them on Xeno-Canto. And he's had some interesting calls from people using them. That's open source and open use. And so you're supposed to contact if you're using it commercially or something, you're asked to contact the the recordists. And so he's been contacted by one woman who was doing an orchestration of some sort where she wanted to add a hermit thrush song to the, to her piece. And she contacted him and got his permission to use his hermit thrush recording and promised to send him a record of it for, you know, recording of it, when it's done. And just things like that that, you know, general audiences can go to as well as bird people. And listen to any species worldwide. It's an amazing kind of source,.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:05:08] Whereas Cornell is more oriented toward researchers. And because you can't just hear anything in the Cornell collection without permission. Whereas you can with Xeno-Canto.

David Todd [01:05:28] That's great. Well, it's wonderful that that you have, you know, learned so much about birds and have taught so many people about them, and it seems like you just have a real affinity for the natural world, even to the extent I understand that you have been named as a bird. What, how did you come to be known as the Western grebe.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:05:52] Well actually back in on that? Really, it was on that first trip with Edgar, who was the cassowary, the first trip to Mexico that we did together, we were joking about people in the Travis Audubon Society back home. There was one lady who was, um, who was a real gossip and we were laughing and said, we were saying that she sounded like a mocking, she was like a mockingbird. She repeated everything that she heard. And we started goofing around and talking about how people are like birds and, and Edgar really honed in on this. And he, he said that he would be a southern cassowary, an ancient cassowary, because he was, he, and truly he had a real understanding for how, the impacts people were having on the Earth from early on, and he had instilled that in us from early on. And but he liked the idea that the cassowary, which had this strong inner claw and sometimes even killed people, that that it represented sort of birds getting back at humankind, or standing up for the birds. And so he liked the idea of himself being an ancient cassowary.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:07:40] And he then started, we were all trying to figure out what names we should be (and this is John and Frank and I, as well as with Edgar). And Edgar named me the Western grebe because of my long neck and my supposedly svelte, you know, dimensions. And I was also kind of a swimmer at the time. I was a competitive swimmer for a while. And so, I mean, when I tell the story now or when Richard tells it, he may say it was for my elaborate courtship display, you know, how they walk on water? But also it was in one of

the oldest AOU checklists, it was the number one bird on the AOU checklist. And Edgar referred to that when he named me Western grebe. And I say it these days for my red eyes, but that they're all sort of sitting.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:08:57] And, and then John was named the Peppershrike because he was spirited and had a bouncy song. He was, he was chunky and cheerful, as they say. And Frank was originally named Hylophilus, the Gray headed Hylophilus, which is a relative of the Peppershrike. But that later got changed to Hoopoe because he was he became kind of European and he was, it has a fabulous flight display where it does kind of loop-the-loops. And, and he did some some incredible loop-the-loops himself. So that seemed fitting and that stuck.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:09:49] But, but that was kind of where it came from, was that early 1960 trip to Mexico when we all just started laughing and talking about bird names. And, and Edgar loved the idea of, of giving people a bird name which elevated them in his mind to a different realm from human beings. And he named everybody at the Press, at the University of Texas Press, who were working on the Bird Life of Texas. Hermit thrush was the, the art person. And that elevated her too, and he always called them by their names.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:10:33] And it was interesting. One thing about Suzanne Winkler is that, about the naming thing, is that even though he had these names for us and we called him the Cassowary when we were around Edgar and we used, you know, each other's bird names around Edgar. It wasn't until Suzanne Winkler entered the scene that she actually started using our bird names when Cassowary wasn't there. And she was the way in which they the bird names came to really stick because she would use them all the time, and, and we, we came to love that.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:11:20] And now my brother, the Peppershrike or the Pepper, and Frank is the Hoopoe and I'm the Grebe and all the people at Field Guides have bird names. In fact, we just recently had, Ned Brinkley put together this little article about the bird names of everybody at Field Guides and kind of tries to explain. And we've even come up with a little calendar that we're going to sell this year that has the sort of the first 12 people Field Guides with their bird names and explanations and artwork of the birds, and then a little photograph of the person. And it has a photo of the Cassowary and then an explanation of how that started.

David Todd [01:12:17] Isn't it wonderful how, as you tell the story of how this started, you know, nearly 60 years ago. And it's such a wonderful connection, both with the early days of birding and guiding and, of course, Edgar Kincaid and that whole circle of friends that you've had. And then the link with the natural world, I mean, that there're these funny associations. So, a wonderful story.

David Todd [01:12:50] Well, let me let you go pretty soon. I'd just like to pose one last question, if you don't mind. We've covered a lot about both the Eskimo curlew and about birds and birding, guiding more generally. But is there something that you might like to add before we wrap up?

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:13:16] I mean, I've, I've said a lot, but to me, I think the, the thing that pulls it all together for me is that. All of these birding tours and bird artists and everything is sort of, relates to an increasing realization that commitment to protecting begins with caring and that, that caring, you know, stems from love, and that through birding, love grows sort of

one bird, one region, one giddy immersion at a time. And, and, and that's, so it's little wonder that so many of us became bird tour leaders. You know, some of the early days, Victor and David Wolfe and, and then John and Poncho and I all became bird guides. And that, it doesn't surprise me in that that we all came to that realization in, together and/or independently. So, I think, I hope it still, still survives after this coronavirus period, after we get through this. And I'm looking forward to, to that period.

David Todd [01:15:04] Yeah, well, I hope that you continue to share your passion and knowledge about birds and the natural world, and thank you for doing a little bit of that today.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:15:17] And thank you for trying to, to pull together a lot of the history.

David Todd [01:15:23] Well, it's a pleasure to, to hear your thoughts and to get to know you a little bit better. So thank you very much. Enjoy the day out there. And I hope our paths cross again.

Rose Ann Rowlett [01:15:37] Thank you.

David Todd [01:15:39] Take care. All right. Bye now.