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**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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**David Todd** [00:00:03] Well, good afternoon. I am David Todd and I have the privilege of being on the line with Jim Stevenson. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas. And for a book and a Web site for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is based at the University of Texas at Austin.

**David Todd** [00:00:34] And I want to stress that Mr. Stevenson would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit as well.

**David Todd** [00:00:42] And so before we went any further, I just want to make sure that that's okay with you, Mr. Stevenson.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:00:48] Absolutely.

**David Todd** [00:00:50] All right. Well, let's let's get going.

**David Todd** [00:00:52] It is Wednesday, August 24th, 2022. It's about quarter of three Central Time in the afternoon. Again, my name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas and I'm in Austin. We are conducting a remote interview over a computer platform with Jim Stevenson, who is based in the Galveston, Texas area.

**David Todd** [00:01:18] Mr. Stevenson is director of the Galveston Ornithological Society, a professional bird guide, and an author of 11 books, and a publisher of a nature newspaper called "Gulls n' Herons".

**David Todd** [00:01:32] Today, we'll learn about his background and experience, and his insights about the study of birds, and particularly about the conservation of an endangered bird called the piping plover.

**David Todd** [00:01:45] I thought we might start with just a question about your early years. I understand that your father was an ornithologist, and I was wondering if you could talk about him or about other folks or events in your life that might have influenced your sort of burgeoning interest in animals, and birds in particular, as you grew up.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:02:06] Yes. I feel very privileged to have been raised by an ornithologist. And also my mother was a schoolteacher, and she cared a lot about animals as well. So I kind of got the double whammy growing up.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:02:22] And when my friends at school would get together in the afternoon and go play football, of course, or something else that might have given them concussions, I

was out chasing snakes and looking at birds and things like that. And it not only gave me an early exposure to birds and other animals, but I think it gave me kind of a wholesome feeling about the world. I was kind of insulated from traffic and car horns and houses, and I was just out in nature, and that was a really good way to grow up.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:03:05] And then I started going on field trips, when I was old enough, with my father, and although I'm not sure he always appreciated my love of snakes, he did appreciate the fact that I was learning birds, and especially learning their calls and songs, which he was a big believer in as well.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:03:28] So I consider my early years very lucky and I look back on them with, with a lot of fondness. And much of that I don't really let go of, even as I approach 70. It's just all very special to me.

**David Todd** [00:03:50] That is very nice to have that kind of upbringing that, you know, brings you close to people that that are in your family, but also insulates you from all the hubbub and car horns of modern life. That does sound like a good childhood to have.

**David Todd** [00:04:09] Well, and it sounds like your, your parents had a real educational bent, but were there any sort of classmates or teachers that you might have met in in your formal day school that could have led to your interest in nature and science and birds?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:04:30] Not really, as far as teachers are concerned. I did have some teachers that I cared for a great deal and learned a lot from, including band and choral directors. I think I majored in music in high school.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:04:45] But there were other people, some of whom were students of my father, who went on to become biologists. And one was a herpetologist, and there were a couple of others. One was a teacher who taught me that science was about teaching students to think and solve problems, and not just regurgitate memorized material on a Friday test. And I would have to say that these people were real authorities in my life, and I got to listen to them and, and fortunately took their advice.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:05:28] And now, as since I worked with kids for 25 years, I was able to give a little bit of that back. And now that I've done this job for 27 years, I've been able to write books and newspapers and a billion PDFs to our membership, sharing my views of nature and, and what matters and what we can do to facilitate animals and plants being successful.

**David Todd** [00:06:03] So it sounds like not only were you, I guess, getting the sort of grounding in animals' behavior and ecology, but also a bit about how do you facilitate their success, how you conserve their, their place in the world?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:06:25] Well, there really was a big difference between my childhood and now, more than just, you know, 60 years or so. But the fact is, ecology was just becoming a science back then. And in fact, my father scoffed a bit at ecology. And when the University of Florida Presses wanted him to write more about the ecology of Florida birds in his giant book on Florida birds, he really didn't know very much about it. I think his insecurities were creeping out a little bit there.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:07:04] But as I got to know some of his students and other people who were in the field, I began to realize that simply identifying a bird, or putting it on a list or whatever, is not really the whole experience. And in fact, it's not really a huge part of the experience. But learning about their needs and making sure that our species doesn't shortchange their needs became more and more important.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:07:37] I had a life list of birds, and actually one of my books is "The Quest for 5000 Birds", which I accomplished, I guess, in the year 2000. And now I look back on that as almost foolishness because what was I doing for those birds? And, and now I'm in a much happier place working for environmental legislation and getting rid of endangered species [excuse me!], getting rid of invasive species and standing up for endangered species. I feel like these animals have become my friends. And maybe more important, I feel like I've become their friend.

**David Todd** [00:08:30] Well, that's nicely put.

**David Todd** [00:08:35] You know, I think it might be good to go back a little bit about your, your education. I understand that you did graduate studies in bird migration. And I was wondering if you could give us a brief introduction to what you were studying and what you found.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:08:57] Sure. I began as an undergraduate, actually, getting some academic credit, just not much, but going to nearby Saint George Island, southwest of Tallahassee, where I was going to Florida State. And every four days or so, I would go to the island in the fall and count birds on cool fronts that were coming through because the birds migrate with the cold fronts.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:09:30] And I did that research for Dr. Frances James, who is, of course, retired, still living in Tallahassee. And she commented that it would, it could be very useful data. And so when I got into graduate school, I did, in fact, a master's thesis under Dr. William Tiegen on this same topic of spring and fall bird migration and wrote a, I guess a 70-page thesis or so as part of my master's work. And it really gave me an opportunity to do some research and understand the value of it.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:10:18] And then I'll have to add that several years ago, on the 30-year anniversary of that thesis, I went back to Saint George Island from Galveston. I had to live over there in the fall for about six weeks, and I repeated that research and had a discovery that was unexpected and very concerning, and that was, there were only three cold fronts in the entire September, October period. And so most of the birds didn't have a cold front to migrate with.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:11:00] And I found them in flocks. They were more tired than birds usually are on cold fronts. Usually they're quite chipper and excited. And I realized that climate change, and therefore fewer cold fronts to give them the north wind to migrate to the tropics, may be part of the problem with the disappearance of our songbirds, which some avian ecologists have placed at about 40% of the original population.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:11:34] So I had an opportunity to learn some things that were really scary. And of course, I've passed on that knowledge to others.

**David Todd** [00:11:44] Well, that's fascinating. And I guess one of the benefits of having done this kind of work for a long time is that you can see these trends that can take a while to become clear. That's, that's amazing.

**David Todd** [00:11:57] Well, so tell us a little bit about your training at the hands of your, your parents and then these professors at Florida State. Was there anything in any kind of general culture? I know some people pick up, you know, sort of a lay person's book or maybe a general-interest film or a TV show, and they learn a lot from it. Is, was that the case for you?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:12:34] I think I was probably more self-educated than simply reading a book because a lot of what I was delving into I was doing because there hadn't been much research in that regard. Most of the big ornithologists were from New England, or, or further north, and it was really hard to find research that had been done on bird migration in the South. And in fact, if you'll bear me just a couple of more seconds, there's a pretty funny story about that.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:13:13] I was trying to get some background research before I started my work, and I started poring over a number of the ornithological journals and was really interested in the abstracts that I read, but I couldn't find anything on bird migration. And finally, and I remember it was 1:45 in the morning, and I was still sitting on my couch reading and I started reading an article about work that had been done in Florida, which naturally piqued my curiosity. And it was about birds that had flown around the Gulf, following the Florida shoreline, which was exactly what I was experiencing here in Texas. And I read the entire article. I don't know what time it was when I finished, but it was 45 pages. And I got to the end of the article where it has the professor or the researchers name, and it was Henry M. Stevenson, from Florida State University.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:14:19] It was in 1953 that it was published, and it was almost as if my father was reaching out from the beyond, giving me the, the research tools that I needed, and a very appropriate parallel bit of work from Florida.

**David Todd** [00:14:40] Isn't that great. So really another way that he influenced you, not just in field trips that you might have taken with him, but through this kind of unspoken bond through that article.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:14:53] Right.

**David Todd** [00:14:53] Yeah, that's great.

**David Todd** [00:14:57] Well, let's, let's shift to Texas, if you don't mind. You've told us a little bit about your upbringing in Florida, but I'm really intrigued by this home that you've settled into on Galveston Island, which seems like an extraordinarily rich place to be a ornithologist. I think that you've seen over 320 bird species at your home. That is just amazing. And I was wondering about some of the highlights of the species that you've seen and what you think is so attractive about Galveston Island to birds.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:15:33] Well, it's been 27 years here, and that's a long time to be on a piece of property that's in the middle of the bird migration. So consequently, it has now, at 324 species, the highest yard list in the history of North America. I'm very proud of that. But it is largely because it's placed in such a perfect spot to pick up circum-Gulf migrants, and trans-

Gulf migrants, and wintering birds, and birds that summer here. And so they come in in the spring to breed. And it really allows me a broad spectrum of birds.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:16:15] And of course, I haven't done anything to the habitat except actually improve it in some ways, planting fruiting trees and flowering plants, and keeping it as natural as possible. And keeping the homeowners' association from getting their hands on various parts of it, to, to put a nice pretty lawn there or something.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:16:41] But I am here a lot and I've got huge glass windows around about half the house. So, really a flea doesn't drop out there without me seeing it. And there are some days that are just astounding, when we have fallouts in the spring or fall, and I can have 30 or 35 species of birds in the yard with tanagers and grosbeaks and buntings and orioles and of course, warblers.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:17:14] So, not only do I get to do conservation and science, but it's also, I am totally in heaven here.

**David Todd** [00:17:26] That's great. You're, you're a fortunate guy.

**David Todd** [00:17:30] So I think one of the projects that you've been involved with is, is a group called the Galveston Ornithological Society. And I was hoping that you could sort of lay out how that began and what some of the goals of the Society might be.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:17:48] Yeah, well, I, I began it in 1995 when I moved out here, and the idea was to, to give the public an opportunity to join an organization that, you know, doesn't even charge dues. But we give them the opportunity to learn and do. And the opportunity to learn is based around bird study. And a lot of them have life lists, and many of them now have cameras, and also conservation. And some of them are willing, sometimes grudgingly, to come to conservation activities like cutting tallow trees, which is an invasive that we're trying to reduce on the island.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:18:33] And they also go with me on longer trips to places like Africa and Australia, and a number of North American destinations like Arizona and Florida and Alaska. Costa Rica is a big favorite too. But these trips give them an opportunity to see birds they would not have been able to see. And we make a little bit of money off of it so we can invest it in our conservation activities and in public environmental education, like making signage for birds at the beach or what have you. So it all works out very well.

**David Todd** [00:19:21] So another sort of organ, I guess, for outreach that I understand you've been involved with for a long time is, and maybe I believe you may have organized it, the FeatherFest, this birding and nature photography festival - same sort of question, you know, how did this start and what are you hoping to achieve through it?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:19:45] Well, I was on the committee that launched it and stayed with it for several years. But it is entirely run by the, by an institute here in Galveston, a nonprofit, and they have an outstanding director. And they bring people to Galveston, and usually right in the heart of the migration. And it's quite a thing to see people who have never really experienced trans-Gulf bird migration or really gone birdwatching, to go out and see the blues of buntings and the reds of tanagers and the orange of orioles. And they just come back to the site after the field trip, just shocked at what they saw.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:20:36] And I think that's a good thing. But what's a great thing is that they come back with fresh eyes and a willingness to help these birds in any way they can.

**David Todd** [00:20:51] Yeah I guess there's always that tension with birding is, is, you know, there's the opportunity to see the birds, which can be just so and, you know, engrossing. But then there's also that sort of nagging feeling like, gosh, what do you do for these, these creatures?

**David Todd** [00:21:12] Well, tell me a little bit about the birdwatching tours that you've led over the years. I think you mentioned that you've gone to distant places, you know, Australia certainly, but then also trips within the United States - Texas, Arizona, Florida. What are some of the, your favorite places and maybe some of the highlights of those experiences?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:21:36] Oh, boy, I wish we had longer. I would say the North Slope of Alaska is one of my very favorite places and the right-brain side of me is is frankly very emotional about going into the Arctic and seeing birds like eiders that have flown over the Arctic Ocean from Russia to breed here, going out to the Aleutian Islands and seeing birds that I had never seen before, and seeing a half million of them the first day I see them, breeding up on the huge craggy mountains.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:22:19] These are, boy, these are experiences that, that stay with you for your whole life.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:22:25] And of course, when you're outdoors, other things happen, too. We've been on ferries off the Aleutian Islands and had whales breach in front of us. And we've been in in Costa Rica birdwatching and had maybe a resplendent quetzal male drop in in front of us and start courting. And, you know, these are, these are tough experiences to separate yourself from, and who would want to?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:22:55] So, I guess I feel like it's an amazing world out there and I don't want to miss it. And there are other people who also don't want to miss it, apparently, because they go on our trips and they always feel that they got their money's worth. And that's probably partly due to the fact that we don't charge nearly as much as most of the outfits.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:23:20] But we, I, bought vans years and years ago, which I keep in these places. So we don't have to continually rent vans, which is expensive.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:23:31] And I know the best places to stay where people can be happy, but it's not exorbitant.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:23:38] And these trips have really been a godsend for the people who go, for the GOS itself, and I think for conservation, because many of these people have come back, and have realized the lesson about the environment globally, but the environment locally. And they chip in to help the local environment. And if there are enough people like that, perhaps spurred on by birding, then this becomes a global impact.

**David Todd** [00:24:17] Yeah, I can see that. I mean, that you think there's a line there about, you know, to care for something, you have to love it, and to love it, you have to know it. And it sounds like you're exposing a lot of people through your, your tours that way.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:24:35] And then also, I think you've been a prolific writer. I'd love to hear about the Gulls 'n Herons newspaper, and then also these books that you've, you've put out there.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:24:50] Well, some of it is pure scientific. Like I wrote the first field guide for the southern United States, "Birds of the Gulf Coast". I guess it came out a couple of years ago, and it's sold very well. Years before that, I wrote "Bird Life of Galveston", which is, just like the name implies, but it has big, beautiful pictures of birds in it, not the tiny little field guide kind of pictures.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:25:25] And bird photography is a massive love of mine. I just can't get enough of it. So, writing these books, I'll have to confess, gives me an opportunity to do something with my pictures.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:25:40] But also, I produce two PDFs a week which go out to our members. And these are my pictures and I have a little maybe four-line description of the bird and particularly secrets about it. Not just, you know, this bird has black wings because you can look at the picture and tell that, but interesting factoids about it. This is sort of an introduction to ecology, which I think a lot of people haven't really formerly had. And I find that they are fascinated by the secrets of these birds.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:26:22] So, between the books, which are, you know, a little more formal and the PDFs, which are informal and, and occur twice a week, I think people have the opportunity to really learn about birds if that's what they want to do.

**David Todd** [00:26:41] I like your effort to not just, I guess, show these birds, but also tell some interesting facts which may give clues about their ecological niche and, you know, the part they play in the natural world.

**David Todd** [00:27:02] Well, I thought maybe as an example of this, one of the birds, which I think is of great interest on Galveston Island, and rare to boot, is the piping plover. And we always like to ask narrators to sort of use the experience that they've had growing up, and the skills they've earned, to talk about a particular creature. And then I was hoping that you could introduce us to the piping plover, maybe tell us a little bit about its life history.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:27:32] Well, sure. Piping plovers don't breed here, but they winter here. And they apparently can't wait to get back because we begin getting them in July, remembering, of course, that they were breeding in June. So, apparently they like our beaches a lot. And you can understand why, because they're a very light-colored bird, almost the color of sand, which we in the business would call, "cryptic coloration".

**Jim Stevenson** [00:28:03] They have a black ring around their neck, which might appear strange to some. But the function of that is what we in the business call an "irruptive mark". It breaks up the bird into pieces. So, if it stands still out on the white sand, this white bird disappears, if there's a falcon in the air or a predator running through the grass or, you know, near the beach. So, that's something that was adopted by many plovers and some sandpipers. And there are some other birds that have rings as well, as other irruptive marks like big patches of color and things like that. This also breaks up the shape of the bird.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:28:53] Piping plovers have a short bill, like most plovers do, because they're not probing into the sand. They actually pick up their food off the surface. And this

might be in the form of tiny arthropods or things that wash in from the water. Small fish occasionally. Although not fish so much.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:29:17] And, they are closely related, and look a fair amount like, some other species of plovers which have also been in trouble, like the snowy plover. The Cuban snowy plover is in fact an endangered species. But Wilson's plover breeds here, and it has those rings, or a ring, around the neck.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:29:43] And these birds are just kind of quiet, easily overlooked, unassuming little birds. But they have a right to life on Earth. And bad decisions that our species have made have cost them much of their population. So they are struggling for survival.

**David Todd** [00:30:07] Well, what do you think are some of the major reasons behind their decline?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:30:13] Well, there's several. They don't do well where there's beach traffic or lots of people walking on the beach. And Texas has an Open Beaches Act, where it's almost impossible to have an area where cars are not allowed. So consequently, birds get run over. And sadly, piping plovers are among the tamest of birds. And a couple of times when I've been driving on the beach, I've driven right by a piping plover and was just really thankful that I wasn't driving 18 inches to the left, or I might have hit the thing. So that's a real problem.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:31:03] And here in Galveston Island, we had a unique problem. But then I come to find out that it wasn't as unique as I had thought. And that is people who turn loose feral cats near the beach. They find these tame little plovers to be a tasty morsel. And we had one person who had turned loose about 30 cats on the west end of Galveston Island. And one of them, I noticed, was sneaking out at night and trying, and actually successfully catching, piping plovers and snowy plovers and sanderlings and killdeer and things like that.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:31:47] And of course, I went to every law enforcement group I could and nobody was interested in doing anything about it. So I took care of that problem myself.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:31:59] But these birds that have a very specific niche, and not a huge population, are very susceptible to damage from humans, if we're not careful what our impact is.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:32:17] And, I'm happy to say that we no longer have a feral cat situation on the west end of the island. That's been rectified. There are other places that have, like Cape May, for instance, where they breed, where ecologists have worked very hard to try to create a situation to keep the plovers alive, and if there are cat lovers out there to keep them satisfied, one person actually started taking cat lovers on field trips and showing them piping plovers. And I think a little bit of guilt ensued and there became more cooperation between the cat lovers and the bird lovers.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:33:02] But there's a legal issue here, too, and that is that all of our wild birds are protected by law and endangered and threatened species, like piping and snowy plovers, carry a pretty stiff fine for anyone who's responsible for killing one. So consequently there is a fallback plan. But I just think the government is, whichever government, is slow on getting involved in protecting a bird like that when you know someone just gives the excuse, "Well, I'm just letting my kitty cat get a little exercise."



**Jim Stevenson** [00:33:47] So, there's been these kinds of situations that have to hopefully diplomatically be dealt with, but in the end, those plovers must survive. And I think that it's possible for humans to get pushed to a point where they have to do whatever is necessary to protect the things that mean the most to them. And birds mean a great, great deal to me.

**David Todd** [00:34:16] Yeah, well, you know, that's something I just find fascinating and very easy to relate to. I think many of us that are interested in the natural world, and in birds in particular, have been frustrated by the sort of proliferation of cats, and feral cats in particular, and, you know, have often sort of wondered about taking things into our own hands. And I would love to hear, you know, how this whole incident came about back in '06 where, you know, you tried all the alternatives and then just felt pressed to do something, to take things into your own hands. Can you sort of run through that whole experience, if you don't mind?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:35:00] Sure. I did contact everyone from Parks and Wildlife, which was a complete waste of time. The Galveston, the Galveston Police Department, who were sympathetic but told me I should go talk to Parks and Wildlife. The federal people were really short-staffed and they suggested I talk to Parks and Wildlife.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:35:27] And meanwhile, I went out there to keep an eye on things and saw this one particular cat that was not well - it had a limp - with a piping plover in its mouth, it was taking back to eat. And I just lost it.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:35:46] And after all this diplomatic work of trying to get officials to go out there and take care of this cat, which, by the way, it was, it was illegal anyway, because a person can have no more than three cats or dogs in their possession here in Galveston Island. And he had probably 30 feral cats out there that he was feeding.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:36:09] But I took care of the situation with my shotgun and I got arrested for it because it supposedly belonged to this guy. But he had 30 of them out there and he was a tollbooth worker, so it wasn't even his property.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:36:31] So, when it went to trial, he badly lost the case, or the state badly lost the case.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:36:39] And I think that after the case was over, a lot of people came out of the woodworks in support of what I had done, and maybe even more than that, in support of birds and their plight against so many obstacles.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:36:56] And if you believe the work that's done by the American Birding Association and others, there are millions of birds that are killed every year in the United States by feral cats. And it's got to be one of the reasons that our bird population is dropping like it is.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:37:15] So I feel like I was a bit of a sacrificial lamb, but because of what happened to me, I think a lot of people got on board and they just, they just have a change of attitude about feral cats.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:37:32] And, you know, a lot of them see the cats using their lawn as a bathroom, and killing their little lizards and things like that, little tree frogs on their porch and stuff. And it really was an eye-opening experience for a lot of people and certainly myself.

**David Todd** [00:37:53] Well, you know, it's interesting to me there, there's this conflict between laws that protect birds, like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:38:06] Right.

**David Todd** [00:38:06] I think you mentioned the Endangered Species Act. And then on the other hand, these laws, you know, animal cruelty laws, like Queso's Law, and other statutes that protect cats and feral cats in particular. And I, I just was hoping that you could, I'm sure you've thought about this to the nth degree, help explore this tension between, you know, protections that afforded both sets of creatures. And I put together some of these - they may be faintly ridiculous, but they're sort of hypotheticals. And I was hoping you could kind of help us think through this, as a kind of a thought exercise.

**David Todd** [00:38:55] One of the questions I had for you was, how would you compare the fault, or the culpability, of somebody who negligently ignores known impacts of these feral cats on birds and then does nothing about that, versus somebody, you know, like yourself who did something proactive and intentionally killed a cat who was hunting a protected bird. It seems like, you know, you got negligence on the one hand and then you got intentional acts on the other hand. How do you, how do you kind of offset those two?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:39:39] Well, you know, one only needs to look at politics in America to realize that we have disparate views on a lot of things in America.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:39:48] And I really don't have a problem with people who love cats. I don't entirely understand it, but I'm a dog lover and I understand that. And I certainly understand people who love birds and want to study them or whatever.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:40:09] But when one is reducing the other and in fact, in some cases may wipe them off the face of the earth. That's not just two different groups being interested in their particular animal. That's the extermination of a wild, or several wild species, of birds, many, many species of birds, perhaps. And I think that's where I draw the line.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:40:43] But the irony is what happens to these feral cats, and to some people's cats that they own, is just, is just terrible. I mean, even though I don't like what these cats do to birds and small snakes and lizards and frogs and things, I feel sorry for a domestic animal that is turned loose in the wild. It has no idea what it's going to go eat. It has to dodge cars, snakes, and we have plenty of poisonous snakes on this island. And it's almost like the people who turn those cats loose need to be arrested for torturing a domestic animal.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:41:34] So I don't I don't feel a lot of, I don't, I don't have a lot of beneficial feelings for these people. It's like they really need to sit down and have a long think about what they're doing with a domestic animal. Even those who keep their domestic animals, you know, near their house, in their neighborhood, cats can still (and dogs) can go out and catch diseases. They could get run over. There's all kinds of bad things that can happen to animals that are roaming neighborhoods or whatever. And it's just hard to get the sense that these people really care about those animals in a way that animal husbandry would, would approve of.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:42:30] So maybe it's none of my business, but I think that what one bullet might do to a feral cat that's killing an endangered species is not nearly as bad as weeks and

months of misery that, that a cat might experience when it became a feral cat. And from all the research that's been done, and I've read pretty much every word of it, the, the longest any cat is going to live in the wild is about six months, and most of them die horrendous deaths. So I mean, the lucky ones get shot or are run over or something like that.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:43:14] So I really have a, I don't blame the cat, I blame the owner. And it's hard to understand how people can have so little respect, not just for the animals that the cats are eating, but for the cat itself.

**David Todd** [00:43:33] Gotcha. Yeah. Yeah. It's, people have a lot more leeway about choices than, you know, what they impose on other animals, I suppose.

**David Todd** [00:43:46] So one thing I think I picked up in this sort of comparison between the birds and the cats, and between the piping plovers and the, the feral cats, is that it's a sort of uneven see-saw. I mean, on the one hand, you might kill an individual cat that was preying on these birds. But every plover that is taken, it comes back much closer to extinction for the whole species. Is that part of what's going on here, that makes it sort of an uneven balance?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:44:28] Well, it bothers me that any tree frog, or lizard, or salamander, or whatever is killed by a cat. But I think that there is a heightened awareness and, and frustration on the part of the ecologists such as myself, when we see an endangered or threatened species that's being killed. I mean, we have a lot of public tax dollars that are used to protect these, although probably not enough.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:45:03] It just blows my mind that we have a public that's that insensitive to what's going on environmentally. I remember in the Bush Sr. / Clinton election, and I believe that was 1992, people were asked as they exited the polls where they voted, what was the most important issue in your deciding on your candidate. And far less than 1% said, "the environment". And this is the problem.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:45:44] Maybe it would be higher now. I would hope so. But I don't have a lot of a lot of hope in that. But I do think that, generally speaking, we have a little bit more of an environmental attitude, in sum, than we had back over 30 years ago or whatever that was. So we may be making progress.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:46:08] But here's my feeling about what happened with the cat. And I've thought about this many times. Sometimes people will do things, but they won't do things any further, any more extreme, than what someone else has already done. And I felt like when I shot that cat and I got arrested and I went to court and I had to hire an attorney. And even though I was found not guilty, it really upset my life for about a year.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:46:41] And I feel like, since that time, it opened the gate for other people to go, maybe not so far, but to take environmental positions. I know of several people who have approached local governments here on the Upper Texas coast, and every little town has one, about the feral cat situation. And I know that there are also some people who have trapped and put to sleep some feral cats, not anybody's cat, but feral cats, in order to protect birds.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:47:22] So maybe they haven't gone as far as I did, but I think that through what I did, it did open smaller doors. And I'm, so I'm willing to be the sacrificial lamb, and

that's just fine. And I really appreciate that other people have recognized the problem and want to be part of the solution.

**David Todd** [00:47:47] Yeah, well, I, it makes me think of folks who were early in the day in the effort to get the RSPCA going and, you know, recognized cruelty where others probably looked the other way. It's hard to go first.

**David Todd** [00:48:05] So thinking a little bit more about these kind of different duties and how people perceive them, and I guess how this plays out with the piping plover and the cats, I'd be curious how you balance our obligations to a feral versus a wild animal.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:48:34] Well, I have seen innumerable problems with particularly mammalian feral animals. Right now, our national wildlife refuges are being overrun both with feral pigs, which I think are of European origin, and now some hogs that they call Russian boar. I have to believe they came from Asia. And they are just decimating our national wildlife refuges, which are the last vestiges of natural ecosystems that we have left. And that's to say nothing of things like Norway rats and black rats. And, you know, the list goes on and on.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:49:18] So, I think that feral cats pretty well line up in that group. They are doing nothing good for our native animals. And that's what I think we need to be about, is protecting our native species. We don't need to protect a Russian animal or a European animal or whatever, because this isn't Russia and this isn't Europe, this is America. And we have wildlife refuges to protect North American creatures. And if we don't, nobody else is. I'm pretty sure the Russians won't protect it or Europeans or whatever.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:50:01] If people want to keep these animals, like we'll say a ferret, as a pet, fine. I think they're really cute. And I've had dogs and I was pretty attached to the cats of one of my friends that I used to go visit. So I'm not anti-cats or anti-dogs or anti-mammals. I just think that everything has a place and that's especially important when they are displacing animals that we already have here and that we are entrusted to protect. That's why, that's one of the reasons we have refuges and the Department of the Interior and, and State Parks, although they seem to have a lot of interest that may come before that.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:50:59] Nevertheless, even a small state park is going to have some natural land where animals like, you know, anoles and ribbon snakes and southern toads and things like that can live relatively undisturbed, compared to somebody's backyard, or compared to a concrete or asphalt area, which has no real value for anything. So that's kind of how I see these different groups.

**David Todd** [00:51:32] Okay. Well, here's another sort of this-or-that comparison, apples and oranges, maybe.

**David Todd** [00:51:43] How do you compare one creature that may be a predator and another that's a prey? I mean, they both need each other, but they have, I guess, different status and needs. And maybe as an example that that you could talk about - you know, for instance, a hawk or an owl, which is, you know, a common and native bird predator that might, I imagine, prey on a piping plover or other rare bird. How do you, how do you balance, you know, the need to protect one against the other?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:52:24] Well, I have no problem with that whole situation because what we have in the environment is a result of the predators and omnivores and the prey, the

herbivores, all these different organisms arose together. And piping plovers can survive rattlesnakes. And they can survive falcons because they've been living with rattlesnakes and falcons and other natural predators for not just centuries, but for thousands of years since, since the mid Ice Age. And, boy, we're not in the middle Ice Age now.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:53:11] That's very different from an unnatural predator, one that is introduced from another country. Snowy plovers or piping plovers have no idea what a predator from Brazil or India or Australia is. They have in their DNA an understanding of rattlesnakes and peregrine falcons and things like that. But they do not have an understanding of foreign creatures. So that's the difference.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:53:50] And what we have to do is to keep the foreign animals out of our local ecosystems. And of course, it's really hard with plants, but we're busy about that, too, so that we can keep the same general habitat here for the animals that have relied on it for thousands upon thousands of years. What has happened in the last 40 or 50 years will decimate many species of our animals in a surprisingly short amount of time if we don't begin to protect those areas better.

**David Todd** [00:54:33] Gotcha.

**David Todd** [00:54:37] So if you had an animal that was in a black box and another animal was in a white box, and you didn't know anything about those animals, how would you decide which was more valuable? I'm not putting that very well. But see, if you wanted to value these animals that are, have some sort of competition with each other or some kind of rivalry, how do you sort through this? I mean, you've talked about animals that are feral versus wild, and those that are domestic versus exotic, ones that are common and rare. What do you think is the kind of the important thing to look at, figuring out which animals to really try to protect and restore.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:55:35] That's a very simple answer. And I'm, I'm sorry if I didn't elucidate it correctly. The ones that belong here have historically been here: they need to be protected. The ones that we are responsible for bringing into this country, either through directly bringing them over, or they come over in boats or whatever. They, they are the ones that our natural species, like birds and toads and lizards and things, have no defense against.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:56:14] And those animals, and this is even more important: those animals exist back where they came from. They do just fine. So they don't need to be here in order to survive.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:56:27] Now, don't draw any political ramifications for that, because this has nothing to do with people. People are kind of the new animal here on the block anyway, regardless of their ethnicity.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:56:43] This is about, about the ecology of wild animals. They can be, they can be wiped out by species from other areas, because those, those from other areas are not part of the balance of nature. They are able to come in and take over. And that's not survival of the fittest. That's us tipping the scales toward animals that nature is, that nature is unable to manage. You know, the balance of nature, or survival of the fittest, or whatever you want to call it, works very well, as long as we don't start taking in new species of plants and animals from elsewhere.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:57:32] And we spent thousands of dollars to get rid of Chinese tallow trees. And I'm happy that we're doing it. But I could also say that if the people who were here before me, and have gone on, had seen this problem coming, they could have taken care of it a long time ago, and we wouldn't have to spend all this money and time and effort and blisters on our hands from getting rid of tallow trees.

**Jim Stevenson** [00:57:59] It, this keeping our natural world the way it is is something that we have to do or it's going to be beyond control and we're going to lose everything we had.

**David Todd** [00:58:17] You know, I have been impressed, not always pleased, I guess, but it's made me think twice to see during COVID how people have grown very close to pets. And I was wondering, since you've thought a lot about the, you know, the difference between wild animals and animals that are considered pets. I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about, you know, your views. For instance, can you consider a non-tame animal, a non-tame cat, to be a pet?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:59:07] You mean if it's living in the wild or living around someone's house or what?

**David Todd** [00:59:13] That's a good question. Yeah. Does it, do you think it depends on where that non-tame animal might be?

**Jim Stevenson** [00:59:20] Well, if the animal is generally living in the yard, there's certainly a relationship with the person. And, you know, I would never take any action against somebody's pet. And my problem is when that bond between the person and the cat is broken and the cat goes rogue and the cat has to eat. And cats are very efficient predators. So the cat starts eating birds and tree frogs and lizards and all these other things that are disappearing. And I think there is a boatload of people who would like to see us maintain our natural world as it is. And cats just don't fit into it very well.

**David Todd** [01:00:16] Because they're such efficient predators and they reproduce so fast and so on.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:00:21] They are efficient predators. I can't give you statistics on their reproductive rate, and we scientists are very careful not to delve where we don't know. But I can guarantee you they are fantastic predators.

**David Todd** [01:00:35] Yeah. I hope you might just help us think about this idea of what a pet is a little bit more. You know, some people go to great ends to take care of their animals. They vaccinate them. They spay them. And they keep them licensed. And, you know, they repair all sorts of sores and diseases. And others don't. And I was wondering if those who don't put that kind of care into pet, is it a pet? You know, they love the animal but they don't care for it, really.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:01:17] Yeah. I think, you know, as a former schoolteacher for quite a number of years, I see the parallels between that and child care. And there are a lot of people who really don't take care of their children the way they should - whether it's obesity or or things that they let their kids do. They don't supervise them, so the kids get into alcohol and drugs or get pregnant or whatever. I mean, believe me, as working with kids for 25 years, I've pretty well seen it all.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:01:54] And that's, I mean, a lot like some of what you see with, with pets. It just, it just wrecks me when I drive past a creature. Like, like just the other day, I saw a German Shepherd mix that had been hit by a car on the side of the road. And it was obviously dead. And I, I just thought, "Gosh, that's such a sad thing. And how, how shameful it is that that animal was not kept in a, you know, a yard that's penned up or or whatever and is allowed to roam like that."

**Jim Stevenson** [01:02:31] Not to mention the agony that it puts a driver through. I'll have to confess, when I was a boy, about 18, driving on a highway at night, returning home and I was doing about 65, I had a dog come right out of nowhere. I didn't see it coming. And I hit it and went back and it was dead. And I just, I felt awful and I had to go find the owner. I didn't, until the next day.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:03:04] This can be avoided if people will keep their pets penned up. And it's better for the pet, as well as better for the person, better for the poor soul who hits it, better for the bird that gets eaten, and so on and so forth. I think people don't do it because it just makes too much sense.

**David Todd** [01:03:29] Yeah. Yeah. So what if. If you don't go to any of these great ends to care for an animal, you don't take to the vet and have it vaccinated and spayed and licensed and so on. But you feed the cat. You know, that's, that's all. You leave some dry food out. Does that make that animal your pet?

**Jim Stevenson** [01:04:02] You know, as a, as a scientist, I don't really feel like I have any training to answer that question. I, I could only reiterate that if the person is having that contact with that creature, they are facilitating the things that that creature does. And I, I really think they should make a true pet out of it. They should take it in and give it the love and attention and vet care and whatnot that it needs. Or they should frankly take it to the pound. And pounds work really hard at finding owners for dogs and cats, and I applaud their efforts.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:04:48] But what you're really doing in that situation is you're making a more efficient predator. And I really struggle with that.

**David Todd** [01:05:02] Yeah. Um, and so just, I guess these, these views about the, whether a creature becomes a pet, are they pretty unique to some of these animals that, that you know you might see around your house or do you think it extends to creatures like pigeons? You know, I often will see people feeding pigeons in the park and I don't necessarily think of them as pets for those people who are feeding the pigeons, but there's some kind of a bond there because people show up regularly to do it. How do you view that kind of relationship?

**Jim Stevenson** [01:05:45] Well, I don't know how a pigeon feels. I don't know if a pigeon can feel. I, I'm going to have to be honest with you. I think that birds are not very intelligent despite an amazing ability to migrate and an awful lot of information that's in their genes. I really don't think pigeons have a warm feeling about people. I think they get fed by people. And it's, it's an easier life than going out and finding your food. And it's probably a lot safer there in a city park than it would be at, you know, the McDonald's farm or something like that.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:06:33] So I don't know, I, I just I don't see that as being problematic. But pigeons do carry diseases. They do spread diseases, as do house sparrows. These are introduced animals into our country. House sparrows have taken over millions of nests of

purple martins, which are a native species. Starlings carry diseases and these animals are living in the cities, partly because they're not from America, naturally. So it's hard for them to make a living out in the field. But they've also come from Europe, where there were and are cities, and they're part of a huge stock of feral pigeons and house sparrows and starlings. So basically they're here.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:07:31] But they are not, as long as they're in the cities, they're not doing the kind of damage that something like a feral cat will do out in a natural environment. So I think most scientists, most ornithologists, pretty much turn a blind eye to pigeons, house sparrows, starlings, collared doves. And I think it's just about the relatively low amount of damage they do compared to, say, feral cats or wild hogs or Russian boars and things like that.

**David Todd** [01:08:15] This is really interesting. You've been kind to sort of go off on these sort of ethical detours and speculate a little bit about what's right and what's wrong. It's hard, hard stuff to really resolve.

**David Todd** [01:08:36] But I thought maybe, as a final question, we might look into the future. What would you anticipate for piping plover in particular over the coming years and decades?

**Jim Stevenson** [01:08:56] Well, it's one of the few reasons I really want to be dead before too many more years, because I believe it's going to get worse and worse. I think that there is nothing that's been done that's going to alleviate the problems that are being caused. Cities, like Houston, go along with the cat lovers in not attempting to get them to corral their cats. We continue to build TV towers that whack an inordinate number of birds. People are sometimes building wind turbines in places where there are migratory birds or the ones in California that were whacking eagles right and left.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:09:44] You know, those animals just aren't very important when it comes to people and our needs. And until we develop an environmental conscience, and until we are willing to sacrifice a little bit as a body, as a species, then these animals, their population, will continue to plummet. Some have already gone extinct - small numbers. But I think that by the year 2100, extinction of many species is going to be rampant. And I will probably be glad that I went extinct before they did.

**David Todd** [01:10:31] Yeah. It's, it's such a hard prospect to think about, isn't it? You, you've been witnessing this for decades and I guess you see the writing on the wall, and just hope that people start to notice this as you have, you know, the trend are. It's sad.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:10:54] I lay awake, I lay awake sometimes at night thinking about the fact that I'm getting close to 70 and the years I have left are far, far less than the years I have lived, to quote Jean-Luc Picard from one episode. And somehow that's all washed away in the larger feeling that we are losing so many species off this planet in such a short amount of time.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:11:32] In my near-70 years, I have gone from seeing highways at night that were covered with snakes moving, like on Alligator Alley on Highway 27 in Florida, to I haven't seen a snake in about three weeks right now. And that's really not unusual. And it's not just snakes. In weather like this, I used to have dozens and dozens of squirrel tree frogs on my windows. I was just delighted about two hours ago, right before you called, to hear a squirrel tree frog out the window. I mean, where are they going?



**Jim Stevenson** [01:12:15] And I think one of the problems with bird listing is that as long as you can get one, you can put it on your list. You don't need 30. You don't need 100. But that's a fallacy, because when the piping plovers have gone from 30 to 1 down at San Luis Pass, they're almost gone. And you may get it on your little list that day, but down the road, that animal is disappearing off of the face of the earth.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:12:46] And when our population goes from 1 billion to 8 billion in 170 years, you can pretty well understand what is happening to the non-human wild animals on this planet. And it's very discouraging.

**David Todd** [01:13:10] Yeah. I think you're being realistic and frank. I appreciate that.

**David Todd** [01:13:17] I am, I'm curious, you know, from being a schoolteacher, and dealing with young people, what would you tell them? Because, you know, I'm sure that you want to encourage them to do the right thing and use their intelligence and time to make a difference. What sort of advice do you give them about conservation and the future?

**Jim Stevenson** [01:13:44] Well, I gave them what I feel like is more than advice. I gave them an example. We did outdoor research projects and conservation projects when I was a teacher. And I'm pleased to say that many of them went into science in college and, you know, they're free of me then. So they can go get married and make babies and and do whatever they want to do. But I have a pretty clear conscience about my teaching days and feeling that they got at least one example of conservation and others I'm sure happen when you watch, you know, Wild Kingdom on TV or something like that.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:14:31] But why it's not spreading to the human population enough, I really don't understand it. If I hear of someone whose cat killed their bluebird or something like that, it just makes me crazy. But it's the world I live in. And I'm doing my best with newspapers and PDFs and whatnot. So we'll just ... or maybe I won't see what will happen as a result of my efforts. But, but I've done my best and I can live with that.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:15:17] But I am deeply, deeply discouraged at the human race and what we've done to Earth's inhabitants.

**David Todd** [01:15:33] Yeah. We're not very good to our fellow mates on planet earth, Spaceship Earth.

**David Todd** [01:15:44] Well, just to, I guess, wind this down. Is there anything you'd like to add that you feel like you've, haven't been able to cover or, you know, given short shrift to?

**Jim Stevenson** [01:16:00] With great fear and trepidation, I would only say that one thing I have done is to lend my support to other people who can make a difference. And that includes politicians and directors of non-profits that are clearly doing conservation work. You know, nobody wants to make enemies. Nobody wants to make somebody mad. But there are those who are making a difference. They should be upheld and congratulated for their work. And there are organizations who are not doing, they're not protecting their piece of the planet. And I have had to call them out, and I'm just one voice, but I will use that voice to stand up for the salamanders and the toad frogs and all the little creatures out there, because they're worth it.

**David Todd** [01:17:16] Got you.

**David Todd** [01:17:18] Well, Mr. Stevenson, I think that in that same vein of using your voice, I think you made a little difference today. Thank you so much for spending time to talk about all these issues that are hard and complicated and really challenging. And so thank you for teaching us about them.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:17:42] Well, you're welcome. Have a good day.

**David Todd** [01:17:44] Yeah. Good to talk to you. Thank you so much.

**Jim Stevenson** [01:17:46] Sure.