

IN MEMORIAM

MICHAEL R. SAN MIGUEL, 1939–2010

PRESIDENT OF WESTERN FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS, 1999–2003

While attending California State University, Long Beach, in 1990, I had a course in marine biology. One of the labs for this class involved a field trip to Upper Newport Bay and Bolsa Chica to study coastal flora and fauna of southern California. It brought back many of my memories as a child in the 1970s, when my father and I ran around the state looking for birds. I recollect phoning my Dad and suggested that we spend a day birding, just like we had done in the “old days.” From that day forward, he was hooked all over again, and obsessed with an enthusiasm and passion that never waned for the next 21 years of his life. He was an unstoppable presence in the birding community of California and the West until his untimely death on 14 July 2010. Not only did I lose my father, I lost my best friend in the world.

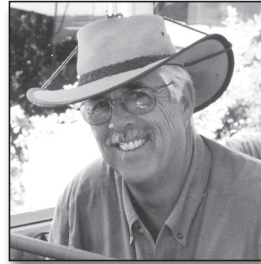


Photo by Lisa San Miguel

Many people have asked me when my interest in birding started. My answer has always been, “it is in my blood.” For as long as I can remember, Dad had a pair of binoculars around my neck. Memories of being in our old VW van, heading to his banding stations at Buckhorn Campground in the Angeles National Forest, Morongo Valley, Fish Canyon near Duarte, California, and Deep Springs College in Inyo County as a child in the early '70s are forever chiseled into my memory. Trips to the far reaches of California as a child will never be forgotten. The “Big Year” trip in 1975 may have been the most memorable. Sleeping under the stars at Furnace Creek or Mesquite Springs, tombstone-hopping at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, crossing the Whitewater River on his shoulders at the north end of the Salton Sea are fond memories. I recall days where he contemplated pulling me out of elementary school to take me down to San Diego to look for a Philadelphia Vireo and Blackburnian Warbler at Fort Rosecrans Cemetery. Or another time where he dragged me down to Malibu in 1974 to look for the King Eider. A classic “Mike” moment was when he left my mother, Gayle, and sister, Lisa, and a house full of guests on New Year’s day with Robert and Elizabeth Copper and several other birders to chase a Trumpeter Swan at Legg Lake. To say my mother was upset is an understatement.

As I grew into my junior- and high-school years, my interest in birding faded and so did my father’s. In the late 1980s he focused on his job and our family. He took up hobbies such as playing basketball, collecting baseball cards, collecting wine, and building his rock walls in the backyard. He never quit teaching me and Lisa valuable life lessons. Although birding and banding were no longer there to keep us connected, we certainly found other activities to keep our relationship strong. Our marathon sessions of cribbage or gin rummy were dramatic and certainly heated at times. We constantly were running around the San Gabriel Valley in search of great Chinese or Mexican food. We certainly made a few “all you can eat” sushi restaurants groan every time we entered.

But my father’s concern for the environment and local conservation remained constant. His battles against the Army Corps of Engineers in the late '60s and early '70s were epic. Confronting quarrelsome and arrogant representatives of various construction firms, city managers, or just people he ran across butchering native habitats

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never ended. He was well respected because he always fought for what is right. He did this with such grace and poise that rarely did he make enemies. His battles for conservation were also waged at home. The oak trees around the yard were never trimmed, despite years of pleading from both my mother and my sister. His backyard “native grass garden” was never pleasing to the eye and horrified my mother as it looked unkempt and cluttered. But Dad never gave in.

A few years ago I suggested to him that he set up more than two hummingbird feeders in the backyard, just to see what would happen. Well, thousands of hummingbirds later, and gallons upon gallons of sugar water later, Dad had easily one of the greatest hummingbird-feeding stations west of Arizona. I recall the hours we spent during peak hummingbird migration looking at those feeders, drinking wine, talking about the kids, the Dodgers, birds, whatever was on our minds. His yard list was nothing short of spectacular. I am not sure of the final number, but he amassed well over 225 species. Such rarities for southern California as the Dickcissel, Bobolink, Broad-winged Hawk, Eastern Kingbird, Blackpoll Warbler, Summer Tanager, are just a few that come to mind. I remember his “best” bird of the yard was either a White-headed Woodpecker or the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker that spent the winter this past year. We spent hours in early June scouring the skies above his house every year looking for Black Swifts or Purple Martins. I treasure the memories of awakening to him hunched over the table on the back patio, measuring and banding birds. In some years he banded hundreds of Lazuli Buntings, Purple Finches, and Wilson’s Warblers in the backyard.

In recent years the two of us started birding together more often. Birding trips to southeastern Arizona, Texas, Michigan, the Salton Sea, Death Valley, Galileo, the Los Angeles River, and the big days shared with Jon Feenstra, Todd McGrath, and Kimball Garrett remain some of the fondest memories with my father. As I grew older and began the process of raising a family, my hours in the field dropped significantly. Essentially, birding for me has been narrowed to local patches near my home in La Verne, California. But I was always in constant contact with my father, who was updating me on what rarities were around or just to tell me about his frustration with the Dodgers. We always made a point to have lunch with one another and catch up on all the things that were going on in our lives. I was able to spend some time on the phone with him the day of his death. The conversation was the same as it always was, “What time is Jake’s game on Saturday, how is Alex, are you guys coming over for dinner on Sunday, did you get the e-Bird list I shared with you from 1993?” I hung up the phone and that was it. . . .

Birdwatching and conservation aside, Lisa and I could not have asked for a better father. He was an astonishing grandfather to my two children, a wonderful husband to my mother, and a mentor to so many. The loss of my Dad is indefinable, but I have a lifetime of memories to cherish, and the lessons in life he taught me will not go to waste on my two children.

Rest well, mi amigo!!!

Michael J. San Miguel

Mike San Miguel’s family specified that donations in memory of Mike be made to Western Field Ornithologists. WFO and the family gratefully acknowledge the donation of \$5000 from the Pasadena Audubon Society to establish a Mike San Miguel Youth Scholarship Fund. We also thank and recognize the following people, organizations, and companies who have contributed so generously, over \$10,000, to the Mike San Miguel Memorial Fund or the Youth Scholarship Fund.

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