

IN MEMORIAM

JON P. WINTER, 1941–2014



Jon Winter, the secretary of the California Bird Records Committee during the first seven years of its existence, died of heart failure on 3 June 2014 at the age of 73 in Santa Rosa, California, his home for 42 years. He is survived by his wife of 37 years, Christine, his two daughters, Danielle and Erin, and twin grandsons, Bryson and Wyatt.

Jon Pomeroy Winter was born in Butte, Montana, on 12 January 1941 and lived there until age nine when his family moved to San Francisco, where they resided a short while before resettling in San Rafael, California. There he grew up, started birding at age eleven, and attended high school. Besides birding, Jon's other early passions included sports (varsity football) and music (he played drums and flute), which led to gigs playing in clubs in Sausalito. After graduating from high school, he followed a musical friend to New York City in 1963 and soon immersed himself in the avant-garde (free)

jazz scene, supporting himself with odd jobs, including delivering notes and scripts to Broadway actors as a courier for a talent agency. Playing flute and percussion, Jon led a band, the Free Form Improvisation Ensemble, was a charter member of the Jazz Composers Guild collective, and enjoyed the company and inspiration of some of the jazz giants of the day. In 1965 Jon, tired of the jazz lifestyle, returned to northern California and turned his attention to birds.

In 1969 Jon moved to southern California to attend San Diego State University, where he majored in zoology. He soon met many of the area's prominent birders and began to bird regularly with Guy McCaskie (whom he described as a mentor), Cliff Lyons, Scott Terrill, and others, often going on extended trips throughout California and beyond (e.g., Baja California and Texas). Jon was as much into mammalogy as ornithology and while on birding trips put out mammal traps nightly. On such trips Jon would play his wind instruments around the camp fire, and was known to call in saw-whet owls with a wooden flute. Between birding locations he would let others drive while at least once a day he meditated. On a trip north from San Diego, Jon first met Rich Stallcup on a pelagic trip to the Farallones.

In the late 1960s Jon learned of the nascent California Field Ornithologists (CFO), joined as a charter member, and also joined its nine-person Rare Bird Committee in 1970. At its inception the committee adopted procedures similar to those used for about a decade by the Belgian and British rarities committees, which were familiar to CFO co-founders Pierre Devillers and Guy McCaskie, respectively. Jon volunteered to serve as the committee's voting secretary, and for the next seven years managed the committee's process of reviewing rare bird reports in a manner that is remembered as organized, clear-headed, and without drama. Jon wrote the committee's first report, covering the years 1970–1972 (*W. Birds* 4:101–106, 1973), and co-authored its second report (*W. Birds* 6:135–144, 1975). Details of the format and contents of such committee reports have changed over subsequent decades, but those first two set in place the essential elements of all of the reports that followed. Jon's active involve-

IN MEMORIAM: JON P. WINTER

ment in the committee, and in WFO, ended when he stepped down as committee secretary in November 1976, but he remained a member of WFO until his death.

Jon left San Diego and transferred to Sonoma State University in 1973 to be near his terminally ill father, and he received his B.A. in biology from that institution in 1975. After returning to northern California, Jon was extremely active in that region's birding scene. From 1975 to 1979, he co-authored 16 seasonal reports for the Middle Pacific Coast Region of *American Birds*, outlasting five of his co-authors in sequence (Am. Birds 29[3]–33[5]). During that time Jon strengthened his affiliation with Point Reyes Bird Observatory via bird banding at Palomarin, volunteering on the Farallones in fall migration in 1975, and co-leading birding trips to southeast Arizona with Rich Stallcup in 1975 and 1976; he remained a research associate of PRBO for many years thereafter. Jon led birding tours as far afield as the Antarctic, but as with other bird pursuits his teaching likewise was focused in northern California. Jon was among the first to teach classes on bird identification (<http://creagrus.home.montereybay.com/CAwhoJW.html>), and he taught ornithology at the College of Marin or Santa Rosa Junior College for 14 years. Jon was a co-founder, with Rich Stallcup, of the Point Reyes Christmas Bird Count in 1970, insightfully replacing the Drake's Bay and Tomales CBCs but capturing portions of both and additional turf to form a circle that has consistently had one of the highest species and field-participant totals north of the United States–Mexican border.

After high school Jon worked 20 summers as a fire lookout for the U.S. Forest Service, first in Oregon and later in California. He was remembered as one of the best, sometimes arousing envy among fellow lookouts at being the first to detect a distant fire, one well outside his area. He spent a dozen summers atop Duncan Peak near Robinson Flat in the Tahoe National Forest on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, and this location became a major attractant for birders in Jon's large circle of friends. Within this circle, Jon—along with Rich Stallcup, his dear friend for 46 years—was seen as somewhat of a shaman, having the ability to occasionally enter a trance-like state of mind. Perhaps drawing on his time in Montana, Jon took to bestowing Native American-inspired names when the circumstances accompanying a gathering of friends sufficiently inspired him. Jon took the name Lone Bear, and some of the others he named included Apache Kid, Bright Doe, Prairie Flower, Running Water, Short Bull, Singing Lizard, White Bear (later Cloud Bear), and Young Lightfoot. The "Tribe" was a tight group of birders who shared a world view and spiritual connection. They frequently camped at Robinson Flat, birded during the day, and partied at the Duncan Peak Lookout at night. A member of his tribe reckoned one of the most amazing experiences of his life was sleeping beneath the lookout while Jon played his flute as Hermit Thrushes sang. In 1977 Jon left the lookout and things changed, as it was harder to stay connected as folks started drifting down their respective life paths, though they remained connected in spirit.

Jon's time at Duncan Peak garnered him considerable expertise with the Sierran avifauna and spurred his intense interest in owls. One day Jon found an injured Flammulated Owl on the road and nursed it back to health. Observing that the owl was terrified of the mice he tried to feed it, Jon noted its small feet and speculated it must eat moths, which the owl subsequently devoured with vigor when fed. In 1971 he shared his knowhow of locating and actually seeing a Flammulated Owl in an article in *Birding* (3:205–208), and later summarized what was known of the species' distribution in California (*W. Birds* 5:25–44, 1974). Both of these influential articles remain practical and useful to this day. In addition to various scientific articles, Jon later penned very insightful and highly personal memorials for two of his closest friends and birding companions, Cliff Lyons (*W. Birds* 43:192, 2012) and Rich Stallcup (*W. Birds* 44:155–157, 2013).

It is not clear how or exactly when Jon's interest in the Great Gray Owl began, but in 1979, with support from the California Department of Fish and Game, he

IN MEMORIAM: JON P. WINTER

spent 70 days in the field and many more in museums and libraries, trying to better understand the species' status and distribution in California. Among Jon's Great Gray Owl sightings that year were two in places he would come to know well: Yosemite National Park and Ackerson Meadow along the edge of the park on the road to Hetch Hetchy. Jon's first recommendation in his report was that the state place the owl on its endangered species list, and in 1980 it did so.

Jon studied the biology and ecology of the Great Gray Owl at Ackerson Meadow and various spots in Yosemite steadily from 1980 to 1989 and continued to gather data on the species on a sporadic basis thereafter. He completed his M.A. thesis on the Great Gray Owl, receiving his degree in ecology and systematic biology from San Francisco State University in 1986. In recognition of his breadth of knowledge and dedication to the conservation of the species, the 2016 conservation strategy for the Great Gray Owl in California (www.birdpop.org/docs/pubs/IBPConservationStrategyVersion1.0.pdf) was dedicated to Jon posthumously. Jon was also a prodigious taker of field notes, which he typed after returning from the field. Jon left behind 27 large loose-leaf notebooks filled with field notes and about a dozen personal journals. His contribution of knowledge was a pervasive influence in the descriptions of avifaunal patterns in coniferous forests of the Sierra Nevada in Gaines's (1988) *Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope*. After his main tenure as a Great Gray Owl biologist, Jon worked for various environmental consulting firms, and from 1998 up to the time of his death he was the principal wildlife biologist for Jon Winter & Associates.

During the summers he spent studying Great Gray Owls in the Sierra, Jon lived in an old ranch house in Ackerson Meadow where he often hosted birding friends. The meadow was dear to Jon's heart, and he was always willing to lead trips or give talks to extol its virtues in hopes that one day it might be added to the park. Jon's wish was realized, posthumously, in September 2016 when The Trust for Public Land, which had purchased the Ackerson Ranch, donated this biologically rich 400-acre meadow to Yosemite National Park.

Although he will be well remembered as an ornithologist, birder, and conservationist, Jon was also a renaissance man with keen interests in jazz, physics, Zen, meditation, photography, and martial arts (being a holder of a third-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do). A consummate conversationalist, as a mentor he was always willing to share his broad knowledge. As one of his tribe, Raven, described him in a post to Jon's obituary webpage: "Jon Winter was a leader of our tribe, a group of birders/naturalists in the 1970s, maybe 20 in all, who traversed the western states, land and sea, had great, mystical caravans that represented the beginnings of the environmental movement.... He was at once a soulful jazz musician, mystic native sage, grumpy old bear, and joyful, caring friend." These are sentiments we are sure are shared and will be long remembered by many.

W. David Shuford and David E. Quady