

Emilie Payne

Interviewed by Jen Corrinne Brown

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Jen Brown and Natasha Klatt

Jen Brown: Okay, it is March 21, 2017. This is Jen Brown and I'm here with Emilie Payne to talk about her work as a birder and an Audubon warden and her conservation work here locally. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Emilie Payne: Yes, you do.

JB: Okay, thanks. Perhaps a good starting point would be for you to tell me a little bit about your early life and background?

EP: Well, I think as far as where it concerns birding, I would start with when we moved down here. I had thought we came from San Antonio and I had bought the first copy of the Roger Tory Peterson *Field Guide to Birds*, which I brought with me, totally unused (laughter). We moved here in September, and in the early spring of the next year, which would have been 1961, my daughter read in the paper about the bird walks down in Blucher Park. Now she was nine years old at that time, and she wanted to go, and I said "Okay, I'll take you." But, they start at seven in the morning (laughter) and weeks went by and we didn't go. Finally there was a notice in the paper that the last bird walk would be held the following Saturday and Sunday. And she said look up at me and said, "Mother, you promised." So, we had to go (laughter). Of course I promised and of course I took her, and we just happen to hit Blucher Park on a day when they had what we call a fallout. It was a big day. The park was full of singing, colorful, little warblers, orioles, gnatcatchers, thrushes. There was even a green heron up in the tree. There were people there to point them out to us and show us how to use the field guide. We had, just really inexpensive binoculars in those days, but for that, the birds were so close that it was fine. So I was really hooked when I got home, I found all those birds in my backyard too. For the next two weeks, that book was not out of my hands. I propped it up on the window when I did the dishes. I propped it up on the bathtub when I was in the bathtub (laughter). It did not leave my hands for two weeks. I just went right through that book, and we were hooked. We did all the birding activities at the time. We joined the [Audubon] Outdoor Club, which was basically birdwatchers. When time came for the Christmas bird count, of course I was anxious to do that. In those days, the Outdoor Club was strictly for adults. Children were not welcome, even as guests. But my daughter had become so good (laughter) that she was allowed to go along on the Christmas bird count. If you want to look at birds, take a child with you because their vision is so good, they pick up the movement. They're wonderful to have along on a bird count, if they're birding oriented. So that's how we pretty well got started. I think it may have been the following year, we had a very rare bird, a red-breasted nuthatch, spend the winter in our yard. It was just fascinating to watch him. He found the sunflower seed feeder that I had put out for the birds. He

would take the seeds and bury them in the fence, in my gutters, everywhere to save them. What he couldn't eat, he would put away. I had sunflowers hatch out of the gutters (laughter). But, my little daughter, wrote it up and it was published in the Outdoor Club newsletter, so you know, that kind of encouragement was really great. That's where we got started. Then, Henry Hildebrand, the one that you didn't get to interview, unfortunately, had been concerned about the decline of the brown pelican population and he put together the first of the colonial water bird census in this area. Now, of course it was not as extensive as it is now, we just picked out islands that we knew birds were nesting on. And my young daughter and I were assigned to Pelican Island. Two of his students had a boat and they took us out and put us ashore on Pelican Island, and I thought, we are supposed to count these birds, thousands of birds nesting out there on this island. Literally thousands. I didn't know, we had no experience at this. Nobody had taught us how to count. We were just sent out to count the birds. So, we started at the eastern end of the island, since the wind was blowing from the east, and the light was behind us there. My daughter took the birds of one color and one of us took the dark birds and one of us took the light birds. And we just walked down the center of the island and did that count. I had already enrolled in classes at Del Mar [College], much to my oldest daughter's distress. She was much embarrassed that her mother was going back to school (laughter). But I had a biology course and I was so intrigued with that, I know I went in and told my biology teacher, I was telling him about my experience on the island and I said, "There are all these islands along the ship channel, they all look alike, but the birds are only nesting on that one." I said "Why?" And he said, "Well, hell, Emilie, because they like it there" (laughter). The scientific reason for that.

JB: Do you remember what year you started the surveys on Pelican Island?

EP: Yes, it must have been 1968 because my notes start in '69, when I transferred to A&I Kingsville. It was A&I those days not A&M [Texas A&M University-Kingsville], and I signed up for an independent study. I told my professors about this because it was all news to them too. I signed up for an independent study to find out why the birds were nesting on that island and not the others. My notes indicate that I was identifying the vegetation and the characteristics of the island. I collected all the plants and went to the arboretum at Welder [Wildlife Refuge] to identify them. Are we okay? [ed. note: referring to checking the audio recorder here]

JB: Yeah.

EP: Because I had signed up with the independent study, I had to turn in an incomplete on this because there was no birds to look at. I got a letter in the mail that I was on scholastic probation and, mind you, I'm a straight A student (laughter). Well, anyway, the following year, I had gone to Sun Oil Company which had facility out there, a tank battery on Pelican Island. They sent a boat out every morning to check the instruments, and then every afternoon, they'd check again. I'd arranged it, and they were very kind to let me ride that boat out. They put me ashore in morning and they picked me up in the afternoon. In between times, I did whatever I could do, having no experience at this, and no background, and no way to find any background because this was all so new. Then in the spring, the birds began to come in, and in 1970, I think we had five brown pelican nests out there that successfully produced young. So, that's how it got started.

[08:44]

JB: And, what other activities did the Audubon Outdoor Club do?

EP: Well, they have monthly meetings and always have. They have the most marvelous field trips that you can imagine because they get into people's private property where the ordinary birdwatcher cannot go. They travel to the Aransas refuge [Aransas National Wildlife Refuge]. I remember one field trip that we made up to Aransas refuge with Kay McCracken and Doris McGuire (coughs) and some of the old time birders (coughs). Frog in my throat, excuse me. We went very early to hear the prairie chickens boom (coughs). There's a little culvert that runs across the road, and just on the other side of the road was where the prairie chickens were. At first light, the prairie chickens boom. It's marvelous (mimics prairie chicken sound). And you can see them out there. Then from the Aransas refuge came all of the noise of the geese waking up, the sandhill cranes waking up, things fly over. It was just marvelous, you know, but it takes a dedicated birdwatcher to get up at four o'clock and go over just to look at birds. We weren't working or making notes, this was just a fun trip. That's the kind of thing that the Outdoor Club does.

JB: Um-hm. And in the sixties and seventies, it was mostly just birders?

EP: Yes, yes, specifically that was what it was. And environmentalists, you know, because once you're a birdwatcher you realize that you don't have those birds without the habitat, and if you—did Pat Suter talk about their saving the Oso?

JB: Um-hm.

EP: She did. Because that was going to be a marina.

JB: Yeah, were you involved in that?

EP: No, just on the sidelines. Yes, I was in the Outdoor Club at the time, yes and supporting them. The one thing that they did was show that there was nothing but muck down there. You can't put anything on it that's going to survive. Also, the property was for sale, and the Outdoor Club said, "We've got the five thousand dollars, we'll buy it." So they put a stop to that and that's why you now have the Oso out there instead of a marina.

JB: Was the club involved in other issues, environmentally?

EP: Oh, yes, I'm sure. I just don't remember them all. We were always fighting about something being developed, you know. We had to put up a fight for Blucher Park. At one time, there was a house at the corner of the, um, the north corner of the park. Anyway, it went to default for lack of taxes, and they wanted to put a parking lot in there. We went to—you know, and we found some people at the park department and in the city who were in sympathy with the park so we don't have a parking lot there, we have an extension of the park. Just things—yes, all along, the whole time, I'm sure. I just don't remember them all.

JB: Um, yeah, that's okay. So you started going out to Pelican Island?

EP: Yes.

JB: And then what happened after you realized there were only five nests in 1970?

EP: I sort of would have to go back to the original notes on the first bird count. I think what happened, it's just a hazy memory and it may not be accurate, but I think I found three nests that first trip that we went out there. It would have been in '68, I think I found three nests. Then we had five nests the following year. To tell you the truth, I at one time, I had charted all this before we had computers to do it for us, I had charted this on a big piece of cardboard along with the colored bands that we put on them, what colors we had done per year so that I would know what bird was hatched. When I moved to San Antonio, I think I disposed of that because I can't find it, which was a mistake. I could certainly resurrect it from my field notes. One year, we had none. I was able to see how devastating disturbances were to all of the nesting birds, not just the pelicans. Disturbances of kind you would not imagine. People, of course, wandering around on the island. Fishermen, campers, people flying kites over the island. I don't know how many times I would find kite strings strung out and birds twisted up in it. Dogs, people turning their dogs lose out there. Airplanes, students from the airport in Portland. They loved to see the birds go up in the air. They'd fly down there, really slowly like that, and all the birds go up in the air. Reports from the boatmen out there about helicopters. It seems to me that, uh—I contacted somebody with the highway department or some Texas agency, and he told me he would fly over those spoil banks for safety in case something happened to his airplane and he had to put it down. You know, you're a half mile across the ship channel from land. No, no. Please don't do that anymore. All kinds of disturbances that are pretty devastating to bird nesting. You just never knew when you went out what you were going to deal with.

JB: And how did you deal with those disturbances?

EP: As best I could (laughter). As best I could. I even cleaned up an oil spill.

JB: What year was that?

EP: I'd have to go back to my notes, but do you remember the Ixtoc oil spill in Mexico?

JB: Um-hm.

EP: Well, you know, they closed off Cedar Bayou to keep the oil from coming in. Fred Athenmattern(?) from the Corps of Engineers came and told me, "We're not going to be able to boom off the ship channel, which was just devastating to me because this was right there at Pelican Island and we knew the oil was coming. But it wouldn't have mattered because the wind was blowing so hard that anything in the water would have gone right over the booms, and they would have had to stop ship traffic and everything. So we did not boom off the ship channel, and there was oil in the ship channel, obviously. What I've been told is that in cold weather, it sinks, the oil in the water column sinks, and then when the water warms up again, it rises again. I got phone calls who were seeing oiled brown pelicans. In those days we had a lot of structures in the bay, and the birds would sit up on those oil structures, and the boaters could see they had oil on them. I called every agency, every park, everything in the area. Nobody had any oil, there was

not an oil spill. When I went out to Pelican Island, that's where the oil was. Globbs of oil about the size of apples, but so widespread, so many of them, that a pelican could not have sat down on them, and they do, they sit on their belly, on the sand without getting oiled. It was everywhere. I called the Coast Guard, and went out there with three young men from the Coast Guard and we walked along the shoreline, and they said, "Yes, ma'am, you do have oil out here, but there's not enough of it. It doesn't meet our criteria. We can't come out here and clean this up." They gave me a big box of plastic bags, and I took my shovel, and I cleaned up oil.

JB: How long did it take you?

EP: A while. There was no other way to handle it, that I could see. I knew I didn't want to take a bunch of people out there because that's the disturbance I'm trying to eliminate. But yeah, you know, you did what you could. When I first started, the boatmen were so nice. They knew the area, of course, they had been working out there all their lives, and they knew the area. I was fussing about people being there, and this, that, and the other thing. They said, "Well, ma'am, people really don't know. You need to put up some signs." That was the next thing we did, put up signs. It was salvaged lumber. Some of the signs that were doors that I had taken off of my house to replace with other doors. That was just a learn-by-doing process, but we put up signs. Um, well, you know, just whatever—handle it as best you could. I did have one advantage in that I'm short and female, and apparently people aren't afraid of me. When I would find people out there, I would just walk up to them and talk to them, and generally I got a lot of cooperation from them, especially if there was a family. The wife was always the one who I would talk to, or the children. They just didn't understand, you know, but you have to re-educate every year.

JB: Do you have any memorable experiences of doing that? Or one that stands out?

EP: Well one that stands out. After I had started working for Audubon, I actually was hired as the warden for South Bird Island, but they let me be wherever I was, wherever I needed to be. So I was everywhere between South Bird Island and Aransas Pass. One day, I had done my work, done my research on Pelican Island and checked everything, and was headed to Shamrock Island across the bay. From a distance, I saw a big boat come into Shamrock Island, and land on the beach, which was quite the thing to do for boaters from Corpus Christi. Shamrock Island was their destination, a beautiful island, a beautiful protected beach, you know, to protect your boat and your family and all. Anyway, a little boy got out, and I saw him go up the island and read the sign, and he turned and went back to his parents, and they left. I thought, "Oh boy, it worked!" It wasn't me. I didn't do it. I put the sign up (coughs). Can we take a break and find a restroom?

JB: Sure, let me just pause this.

JB: Okay, we are back with Emilie Payne, talking about her work birding and protecting brown pelicans. Um, where were we (laughter)? I guess, uh, what—how long did you do the patrols?

EP: I spent twenty years on a little boat out in the bay. That's a long time.

JB: And what kept you going back year after year?

EP: Well, who else was going to do it? There wasn't anyone else to do it. You get very possessive of it, very protective of it. Of course, the pelican population increased tremendously, and we finally began—well, David Blankenship was the bander, he was the Audubon warden here at the time, and I worked under him actually. He had been—we would go out at the end of the nesting season when most of the birds had already fledged, and he would band all the birds. I remember being in the library here [Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi], going through one of the, uh, I don't know which book it was, but looking for ways to band birds that we could identify them, and the book just opened to the page where they banded swans, I think, with plastic bands that they had engraved numbers in. I passed that information onto David, and we began to make bands like that over at Welder, and then he found a two-color band so that he could make, for instance, a band that was yellow with black letters on it. After we started banding with those, we knew which year our birds were hatched, and which one were coming, and which ones were nesting. I've got that all in my field notes. That's the kind of thing that I really wanted to save in transcribing my field notes. I could do a lot without going onto the island. I did a lot of my work from in the water, either in the boat offshore or standing hip deep in water looking through the telescope so I could see those bands. At one time, I had two nests, I think, with females in immature plumage, but they had the bands on them so I knew when they were hatched, and why they were nesting, and immature plumage, I don't know, except we had very few brown pelicans at the time. Another thing that we discovered, it was 1972, I remember 1972. I was out there with Kirke King from the Fish and Wildlife Service and David, and I looked up and there were brown pelicans with these bright red pouches, gular pouches, which had only been seen in California. We do have a population of birds now that have the red pouches in the nesting, and in the off-nesting season, you can tell them still, they're yellow instead of brown. That was interesting. What else was I thinking about? Oh, this increase of population in midsummer of mostly immature birds. But suddenly, you got a big increase in your brown pelican population. We didn't know, we assumed they're post-breeding wanderers from Mexico that come up here. I did have a red-color marked brown pelican on Pelican Island one summer, and red was the color to mark in Mexico. They just didn't have quite as many people down doing the research on the pelicans. The interesting things, you know, that's why I thought I should transcribe my field notes, really.

JB: Yeah, you should, and then donate them to an archives so researchers can use them (laughter).

EP: Yeah, well, but you have no idea how very tedious that is because in my field notes, I start out with the weather and landing on the island. It's everything, the plants, everything I'm seeing. I guess I could just pick out the brown pelican information and do that, but then it's all combined. Everything is, you know, what's going on on the island effects the pelicans too.

JB: What sorts of things would you specifically put in there, like the types of plants or?

EP: Yes, the types of plants, what's nesting. There were times when I had individual nests identified, and I could go every week and see what was happening in those individual nests. There was one, for instance, there used to be a big reddish egret colony out on Pelican Island. It's too overgrown now, for that, but in one little corner, I think I had seven nests that were isolated. I tagged them so I would know what nest it was, and each week, I would keep a record of what

was happening in that nest. For one thing, I've always thought it was interesting that I found peppergrass in every reddish egret nest that I found out there. They put peppergrass in it. It's nothing, you know, that's just what they do. One time, one year, we had a complete abandonment of one part of the island, and it wasn't just the brown pelican nests, it was the big herons and egrets, too. I called David Blankenship, and I said, "Would you come look and see? I can't see any footsteps, any indication of dogs or anything, would you come look?" With his experience, he knew. We walked up to a brown pelican nest, and he put his hand down in it, and it covered with mites, bird lice, that were in the nest. That's the only way they can combat that, is to leave that area and go somewhere else to nest. I wouldn't have known that without David. He knew what to look for, he'd seen it before.

JB: Yeah, when did you start realizing the brown pelicans were coming back, population wise?

EP: Well, one of the really interesting things was after the oil company abandoned that tank battery, there went my ride out to the island. I hired people to take me out there. I hired a young man who was a third-generation fishermen. He and his dad just told, he said "We used to go out there," because they thought those pelicans were competing with them for their fish. Pelicans eat menhaden and we don't harvest menhaden here, "and we'd go out," and his words I think were, "We'd done everything to those birds." For three generations, the nesting area had been destroyed, and after three generations, you've only got a few old birds left, you know, you don't have any young replacements. It takes a while, but once they started coming back, and then with that influx of birds in the midsummer, suddenly it took off. I think now they count thousands of pelican nests, don't they? Yeah, when I was back to three, and none, and five, and yeah, I wish I hadn't thrown the chart away (laughter). I'll have to resurrect that, won't I? But I saw, I saw it happen.

JB: Yeah, how did that make you feel?

EP: Really nice, really good. Still today, when I hit Doddridge and Ocean and see a brown pelican sailing by, I feel so good, there's one of mine (laughter).

JB: It's a really great success story.

EP: Yeah, well, with the numbers that we have now, it may very well be that they would have done it anyway. In those days, they wouldn't have, without the place to nest untroubled by human disturbance. You know, I went out there one day, and there was a family camped on the island, they had a little boy with them, with a BB gun, and, uh, right over the sooty tern nest. I also found sooty terns nesting out there. They send somebody from Welder refuge out there to check to make sure I had seen sooty terns. They didn't believe it, and it really was odd. There he was right over the sooty tern's nest with a BB gun. I just was furious, and I talked with him, and he said, "Ma'am, I've been coming out here all my life, and I'm going to keep coming out here." So I went back in and called the game warden, and I just happened to have one who was cooperative. He went out there with me, and guess what? That guy was out there with someone who wasn't his wife. They left (laughter) and didn't come back. I think he was pretty much embarrassed. Um, a lot of things. A lot of things. I remember being in the water, I wore my hip boots, looking through the telescope at nesting pelicans, reading off the bands and everything.

Got on the eastern end of the island, and I turned around and there was a boat, and they were waving a red flag. I did take the Coast Guard course, which was very helpful to me, because when I bought my boat, I'd never been on a boat before. Anyway, this is a sign of distress, wave this red flag. So I put my telescope up, put everything in the boat, got in the boat and went on out there, and as I got closer to him, he held up a cartoon of beer, the red was his trunks, he just wanted to party. Nope, we're not doing that, we're not doing that. He wasn't in trouble.

JB: Did you ever encounter any resistance?

EP: Yes, a lot of times, a lot of times. For instance, the man who said he'd been going out there all his life, and he was going to continue to do it. There were some fishermen, elderly gentlemen, at one time. They would fish right close to the shoreline along the ship channel, and nothing I said to them or did made any difference. They kept the birds up in the air, the whole time they were there because they were too close. I thought, "Well, maybe they won't come back next year," and they didn't come back next year. There was nothing—in the state of Texas, if you can get your feet in the water, you can fish. They were legal, there wasn't anything I could do about it except to try to convince them that what they were doing was harmful, and to do it somewhere else, but they weren't having any of it. There was one year that I had, I think it was three fishermen, they would be on the bay side of the island and they would anchor and walk along the shoreline and fish. And that particular year, there were five brown pelican nests down close to the shoreline there. The whole time they were there, the birds were away from the nests, and they were not to be deterred either. The only way that I could control them, or have any effect on them, was just to drop my anchor and sit there, and apparently they do not like to be watched. I lost five brown pelican nests that year, all the production from those nests. I think that was the year, I'd have to go back to my notes to make sure, but the game wardens called me and Chester Smith in. Chester's passed on now, but he was the warden for Cedar Bayou and that area, a big rookery out there. Called us in and told us that if we didn't stop harassing the fishermen, we could be sued. This is just too much. I had lost a car in the bay. Anyway, I'll go into that later. I thought to myself, "Why am I doing this? You do it, you're the game warden." The non-game just didn't have any clout in those days. But they told us that we were going to be sued if we didn't quit bothering the fishermen. I said, "I'm not bothering the fishermen." "Well, they think you're bothering them. They can sue you." So, I know I pulled back, I don't know what Chester did. I thought that was really terrible.

JB: So, how would you describe the relationship between you and the fish and game—wildlife department [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department]?

EP: When I started, the non-game department didn't do anything. That's why Audubon wardens did it, because the non-game wardens didn't. The Parks and Wildlife Department has always been for the game species and the big hunters. That's where their money is. Um, it was left to Audubon. [office phone beeped]. Do they need you?

[00:35:35 to 00:36:27]: [Ed. note: this was just a couple minutes dealing with the office phone]

EP: But, um, occasionally I had a very cooperative game warden who was helpful like the that helped me get those people off the island that day. There was another game warden who was so helpful to me because I used to rehabilitate birds, too, and I had a lot of them in my backyard being rehabilitated. He made me a whole series of cages. It was wonderful. He'd thought it out so that I could break them down and store them when I wasn't using them.

[someone knocked on the office door]

EP: So every now and then, you get a sympathetic game warden.

JB: Here is a parking pass for you.

EP: Thank you, I appreciate that. How do I use this now?

JB: Here are the directions, but when you leave, you just put this into the slot.

EP: I do have a charge card, which would work, I guess.

EP: It just varied over the years, you know. I actually had no legal clout of any kind to use, it was just persuasion and education, and it didn't always work. We had good coverage with the newspaper, and sometimes with television, in the spring. Shamrock Island, especially, is such an attractive place. I would take them out to show them what it was we were trying to protect. Still, David Sykes does a wonderful job in the spring. I'm sure you've read his column. Just, like I said, learn by doing. When I started this at A&I-Kingsville, there was nothing that I could use for a bibliography. There was no—I found one paper that had been translated from the Russian. I don't know what I did with it because I looked for it when I moved. They had done research on spoil bank rookeries, and there was a team of five, and I think they were Ph.D.s and their crews. I was one person trying to find out why the birds nested on that island and not on another one.

JB: And so how did you learn?

EP: Just by looking, and I still don't really know. I have an idea, but, I mean, they have to have an island that's free of predators. Depending on the species, they have to have the kind of vegetation to build their nests. Food supply is very important. Food supply because they have to feed their young, raise their young. And the weather. These squalls that come through are very devastating on nesting birds not only on rookery islands but in the trees, too, especially hummingbirds. These squalls, they just melt a hummingbird nest. For a number of years, we've had hummingbirds nesting down at Blucher Park, and after a squall you can just see the little nest is just all crumpled, the young are gone, and they'll probably re-nest once, but I doubt they'll re-nest twice in a year. So weather plays a part too. Um, oil spills (laughter). Oil spills. We had an oil spill in Aransas Bay at one time, and I remember finding an oiled brown pelican on Pelican Island. I took samples of the oil and had it tested, and it actually had come from that oil spill in Aransas Bay. Once it's spilled, it's still there. It's hard to get it all cleaned up.

JB: Did you ever finish your incomplete from the class (laughter)?

EP: Yes, I did. I saved that paper. The professor gave me an A++.

JB: Ah (laughter).

EP: I saved that (laughter). That got A&I started on doing spoil bank rookeries. They have more of them down in the Laguna Madre than we do here. They've got a whole string of spoil banks down there. I remember going out with those kids, and really they were all just kids in those days, and we'd launch this little boat off of the—you know where the Laguna Shores Restaurant is, down off of the end of Laguna Shores Road, at the very end?

JB: Unh-uh.

EP: Well, there was a little boat ramp down there, ill-defined channels, the guys would have to get out and push us off, we'd run aground so often. It was all just so, "Well, what do we do now?" you know, "What are we looking for?" And we didn't know, but it got them started. Dr. Chaney took it up, and I think they still have a program going where they monitor spoil banks down there, but I know Dr. Chaney's still counting birds during the colonial water bird census.

JB: And that was the professor you worked with primarily?

EP: No, no I never had a course under Dr. Chaney. Never did. It was Dr. Davis, and I think he's passed on now. He just pretty well, let me do—because he didn't know, I didn't know, we just did. In the spring that year, I was able to document nesting birds, how many were there, what kind of young they were producing, what kind of vegetation they were nesting in, which was important, um, just started. I still don't know what I'm doing (laughter).

JB: I think you're being modest (laughter).

EP: Well, I have a little more of idea. I think, as I told you over the phone, I never saw any brown pelican bring any nesting material, and they do make a big nest, I never saw them bring it in to the island, they had to find it on the island. They were pretty particular about the size stick they picked up and where they placed it. It was interesting to me to sit back at a distance with my telescope and watch this going on. I think that may be the difference in what I was doing and what others do, most others do. Most others make a trip and go. I was there—for one thing, when I was still riding the oil company boat, I had to wait for them to come and get me. The most that I got was waiting for them and having to sit there and watch. Just sit there with my telescope, and make notes of what was going on. Um, I should have analyzed my notes more carefully because once I got in, and had to clean up and everything, and then go back to work the rest of the week, that was it. The notes were there on the shelf and then pulled out again for the next weekend. When I was transcribing my notes, and I had designated nests, and I knew what was in each nest, I realized that where there were black-crowned night-herons, there were other young herons that were disappearing out of those nests, and I'm pretty sure the black-crowns were dining on them because the black-crowned young were not disappearing. I think they probably—they would nest in the opuntia underneath the great blue herons that were nesting in the trees, and I think they just were feasting. I really do. I went out one time after a squall, and I had a series of, I think, seven nests that I'd been monitoring totally empty, nothing there. It must have

been the storm. Nothing left. No adult, no eggs, no young, nothing. It must have been the storm. I think, don't really know since I wasn't there to watch.

JB: We were talking earlier about other bird species and how you've noticed changes over time. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

[00:45:28]

EP: Well, it's just obvious to me. I used to keep a notebook on my kitchen table by the window and my binoculars, and I kept a daily list of what I was seeing. It was so common for us to see gnatcatchers, large-crowned (??) warblers, myrtle warblers, we call them myrtles, they're yellow right now, just a little group of them, we'd have this whole little group, and we counted on that, you know. And the sparrow hawks on the lines, the kestrels they call them now, up on the wire. I haven't had a sparrow hawk in years. I heard a gnatcatcher. A kinglet, I saw a kinglet. I've seen two yellow rumps [yellow-rumped warbler], and two orange-crowned warblers, but nothing like the numbers that I used to have in my own backyard, much less in the parks. Everything is against their increase in numbers. Geese are short stocked, we don't have the geese coming over that we used to have. We used to have robins cover the lawns. When did you see a robin down here?

JB: I've never seen one down here.

EP: Yeah, there you go. They were common. It was anticipated in the winter. We would have big flocks of robins. We even had flocks of bluejays. No bluejays, right? But we do have kiskadees, we do have the hummingbirds, the black-bellied hummingbirds, and other rarities from Mexico. I was reading on Texbird, they're seeing red-billed pigeons in the valley [Rio Grande Valley] so I got my book out to make sure to look to see what to look for because we'll have red-billed pigeons here before you know it, I bet. But, no, no, we just have fewer birds, less habitat.

JB: What do people could do to address that problem?

EP: (laughs) I don't think people could because the tendency is to develop everything bigger and better and more. This area where we're sitting was prime bird habitat. My house must have been prime bird habitat at one time. Flour Bluff. Oh, Flour Bluff was full of birds, the brush was so thick out there. I used to do Christmas counts out there. The only way you get through is if you back through it. You can't go through it, put a big heavy coat on and you back through it. Full of birds out there. Okay, I'll give you one example. Where my daughter lives on Flour Bluff Drive, there used to be a field behind her, and there were seven sandhill cranes that came. There were always seven. Without color banding or color marking, we can't be sure they're the same ones. And then there were five. And then there were three. And this year the three came back, but there are houses there where they used to feed so they just flew overhead. They're filling in along Yorktown, an area where we used to look for sandpipers. It was mushy and wet, and we'd have all kinds of birds in there after a rain. They're building it up, they're going to build houses on it. So there's just no place for them anymore.

JB: Um-hm. Uh, have the places you go for birding have changed over the years?

EP: Yes, they have. I used to go birding a lot out in the Knolle Dairy Farm area out there. It was really nice, but they're building—it's just, the city is everywhere. It's kind of sad to see something like sandhill cranes that evidently have always come back there through their lifetime, and they come back and there's no place for them anymore. Their only choice is to go where they can find food and shelter, and I hope they find a place. I really do. I used to see curlews. You know where Suter Park is, at Nile Drive?

JB: Um-hm.

EP: Curlews used to feed in the field across the way before they built everything up. I saw one curlew there, but there used to be a lot of curlews in there. There's just no spot for them anymore. Sparrows. We have plenty of sparrows and blackbirds. They're doing well (laughs).

[00:50:20]

JB: Hm, I wonder why that is.

EP: Well, you know sparrows are not native to the United States.

JB: Right.

EP: House sparrows. They're just very adaptable, and people feed them. There's a lot of birdseed that goes into sparrows. Those that can adapt survive, but they're not necessarily the ones that we think are the prettiest or the ones that we want to keep, and we surely don't want to lose any more species. I understand they're going to withdraw the protection from the golden-cheeked warbler. Did you read that in the paper?

JB: No, I haven't read that.

EP: I cannot believe that. The only place in the world that the bird nests is in the Hill Country of Texas. They're going to withdraw the protection for that because the landowners want to develop that land. See, they can't develop it while the golden-cheek is being protected there. It's just—I guess the man who owns the property has the right to profit from it, but—

JB: Yeah (laughter). Hm, well, is there anything else you want to share or anything I missed?

EP: I just chatter and I can't think of anything more. I appreciate you doing this.

JB: Okay, I'll turn the recorder off now.

[00:51:42]

JB: Okay, sorry, we are back with Emilie Payne, and she was just telling me about rookery islands, if you want to continue.

EP: Yes, about the need for rookery islands. We need as many rookery islands that we can produce, as long as the birds are using them. As long as birds are nesting on those, we need more (laughs). I remember one year that we transferred seven young brown pelicans, the last ones of the year, up to Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge to try to establish a nesting colony up there. I was impressed by the fact that our birds had already finished nesting down here, and their rookery islands up there were packed with birds. The biologist told me, “Yes, the birds had already fledged from there, and this was the second flock coming in.” They’re so short of rookery islands up there that they’ve had two nesting seasons, actually, on these nesting islands. Rookery islands are in such demand that they’re worth maintaining and managing properly for the benefit of the birds. Now if they’re not properly managed, I’m now going to give you Pelican Island as an example. Pelican Island is terribly overgrown with baccharis. It’s a tall plant, a vigorous plant, it makes very deep roots. You have so many of those birds, the gulls and terns, for instance, that need bare, open land to nest on, and there’s no place for them. There’s a place, but there’s nothing like what it was when I was first there when there was not so much growth. Managing that growth is very difficult because you don’t want to use herbicides in a marine environment. They’ve tried burning them, they’ve tried bulldozing them, but the roots are so deep, the plant is so vigorous, I don’t know what to say about how to manage that, but it’s no longer a successful rookery island because it’s so overgrown. All that beautiful property there, it could be used. Well, anyway.

JB: Okay, we’ll stop.