

JOHN TROTT: A NATURAL GUIDE



JOHN IVES-HALPERIN

If we wish to conserve our natural resources, including birds, we need to open the eyes of young people to the planet's natural wonders. Unfortunately, and despite such important efforts as those of the Roger Tory Peterson Institute and of many of our conservation organizations, too little is being done in our public and private high schools in the cause of nature education. Even schools with excellent science

John Trott with several of his students at The Madeira School.

departments often neglect nature education.

An educator/ornithologist striving to correct this situation is John Trott, one of *BWD's* contributing photographers. For 40 years John has taught nature studies to thousands of young people in Florida, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Virginia. Graduates of his classroom work in environmental and conservation organi-

zations, government agencies, and science departments in schools here and abroad. Currently serving as the resident naturalist at the Madeira School in McLean, Virginia, a private high school for young women, he continues to teach ornithology and botany courses that inspire many of his students to go on to careers in conservation.

As a young man John Trott was trained under his friend and mentor Roxie Laybourne, the internationally respected ornithologist at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum. He studied bird banding with Chandler Robbins at Chan's legendary Ocean City, Maryland, banding station. He received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ever since, he has been involved in science education and has especially pursued an avid interest in ornithology. Several generations of students have marveled at his ability to "pish" a sought-after bird from a remote spot, whether in the mountains of West Virginia, the wilds of urban parks, the forests of Mexico, or the lush tropics of Trinidad. John feels that developing in students an awareness of the beauty and accessibility of birds will lead logically to an appreciation of all nature and to a concern for protecting and preserving natural resources.

John's teaching combines several elements. His classroom is not bounded by four walls, not controlled by a textbook. He brings the natural world to the laboratory, using bird skins and feathers and plant specimens, and he takes his students into the forests and fields of the 400-acre Madeira campus. He also invites well-known ornithologists, field experts, botanists, and wildlife

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artists to interact with his classes in lectures and field trips. His ornithology courses feature numerous bird walks and a final exam that requires extensive knowledge of local birds. This is not a typical high school curriculum, but one that stimulates the students to understand the dynamics of ecology in the larger living laboratory of the outdoors. He quotes Thoreau to his students—"I came to the woods because I wished to confront the essentials of life"—as well as Rachel Carson, Edwin Way Teale, and John Burroughs.

Trott believes that, as in an orchestral piece, an understanding of each single note in nature gives the listener a better sense of the entire composition. And for John birds are the notes that can lead to an epiphany for anyone with the

patience to listen and learn.

Another special element of John's style is his ability to encourage adolescents to spend time alone, as part of their interaction with the natural world. During the summers of the 1960s and 1970s, he directed a wildlife research center for high school students in the cool mountains of West Virginia. He taught bird identification and bird banding, tree and plant identification, meteorology, and geology, among other subjects. He is that rare individual who could silence a group of tireless teenagers with his wonderful, spirited readings from Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* on a hilltop at sunset deep in a wilderness area. He also interweaves the basics of field biology with such pursuits of happiness as his "C.I.C.C." plan—collecting,

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identifying, cooking, and consuming wild mushrooms and plants.

In addition to his teaching, John is a well-known bird photographer whose work has been used in field guides, textbooks, magazines (*Bird Watcher's Digest* and *National Geographic*, among others), and such books as John K. Terres's *Encyclopedia of North American Birds* and *Birds of North Carolina*. His intimate knowledge of birds and their ecology is reflected in the detailed information that his photographs convey.

John also gives numerous public lectures on birds and conducts bird walks in and around Washington, D.C. One of his most popular walks occurs at the height of the spring warbler migration on the Madeira campus, an invitation-only excursion that attracts internationally notable

political figures, scientists, and journalists. These walkabouts are a major spring event in the nation's capital.

John lives with his wife, Lee, in a 100-year-old log house on the Madeira School campus. During their lifetime of service to young naturalists, Lee has been John's enthusiastic partner and helper in the classroom, on nature walks, in the photography blind and studio, and in their many expeditions to the opera.

As guide to hundreds of students through their ornithological apprenticeship, John Trott continues to promote the causes of conservation. □

Margaret Lowman is director of research at Selby Botanical Gardens, Sarasota, Florida. H. Bruce Rinker is chairman of the science department at Millbrook School, Millbrook, New York. Both were students of John Trott's.



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