

Keynote Speaker: Emma Rhodes



Ornithologist and South Alabama native, Emma Rhodes has been an avid birder from a young age and began participating in migration banding as a teen with Bob and Martha Sargent at the Fort Morgan State Historic Site in Gulf Shores, AL. In 2019, she became one of the youngest Master Banders in North America and has worked with and studied a variety of avian taxa, from hummingbirds to birds of prey. Emma has worked alongside various avian conservation organizations in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and the Bahamas monitoring coastal birds. She has also worked with both state and National Audubon chapters and is an instructor for the Hog Island Audubon Camp in Maine where her purpose is to educate and inspire the next generation of birders. Emma received her BS in Biology, with a minor in Geographic Information Systems, at the University of South Alabama and is currently a PhD candidate at Auburn University where her thesis work is focused on studying the physiological underpinnings of bird migration. In 2022, her PhD work entitled “Mitochondria Power the Evolution of Bird Migration” received prestigious awards from both the National Science Foundation and the Society for the Study of Evolution. Apart from her graduate work, Emma is a co-founder of Banding Coalition of the Americas (BCA), a non-profit organization focused on better understanding migratory birds using banding and advanced tracking techniques. At its core, BCA believes in the importance of bird banding and research as a public outreach tool and has several on-going studies in the state of Alabama.

Paul Dovie

I have been into photography for over 52 years, both in taking pictures and developing and printing in my own darkroom. My love of bird photography started in Louisiana 40 years ago watching the Brown Pelicans making a comeback and Roseate Spoonbills. After Katrina my wife and I moved to Theodore, AL from New Orleans and with Dauphin Island down the road from us, I have come to love the bird migrations and the Bald Eagles return each year. I now work part time with Airwind Creative in my retirement.



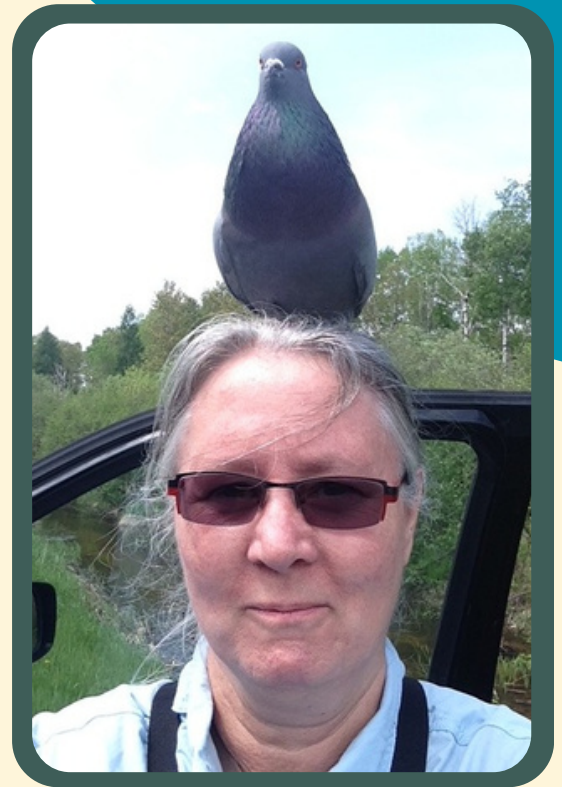
Allison Graves

A life-long Alabamian, I love doing anything outdoors and have always been drawn to birds. Like so many others, the pandemic ushered me into an early retirement, but also allowed me the time and freedom to intently study and learn The Birds. In addition to birding new places, my husband and I enjoy spending time with our grandchildren, hiking, kayaking, camping, and visiting beautiful natural spaces. The perfect trip would include all of these activities. Some of our favorite beautiful places are Great Basin National Park, Joshua Tree National Monument, Yoho National Park, just about anywhere in Utah, and Alabama's own Sipsey Wilderness/Bankhead National Forest and Mobile-Tensaw Delta.



Shirley Farrell

I have been watching birds for over 30 years. I am the education chair of the Alabama Ornithological Society and past President of Birmingham Audubon, now known as Alabama Audubon. I have been in education for over 29 years and I am currently an assistant professor at Troy University.



Frank Farrell

I am a retired high school math teacher. I spent most of my career teaching youth. I started birdwatching in 1998 but I've been observing birds all of my life as a hunter and fisherman and grew up watching my father's birdfeeders. Currently, I travel around the United States looking for "life birds". My current goal is to get 700 American Birding Association (ABA) region birds.

Helen Beers

I have been passionate my whole life in sharing our big beautiful outdoor world with others. I have been a volunteer leading groups and teaching classes in a variety of fields for children and adults along with working then retiring from Florida Atlantic University Pine Jog Environmental Education Center. When I moved to Daphne, Alabama to be near my grandchildren, I joined the local Audubon Society and have been on the Audubon board the past two years along with assisting with the Mobile Bay Audubon Junior Birder Club.



Mason Currier

I'm a 16-year-old birdwatcher and photographer from Mobile, Alabama. I first started watching birds in early 2018 and since then have fallen in love with all aspects of birding! I recently partnered with Mobile Bay Audubon Society to start the Mobile Bay Audubon Junior Birder Club, for which I lead monthly birdwatching trips for kids, across the Alabama Gulf Coast. My favorite place to bird is Dauphin Island, Alabama where I'm often found guilty of wearing shorts while I birdwatch.

Lynne Fitzgerald

A transplanted 'Louisianian' from Shreveport, I came to Dauphin Island birding in the early 2000's as a novice and fell in love with the people and birds of South Alabama. I spent my life as an educator for 35 years with my last 17 as a high school principal. When the Eastern Shore Birders needed someone to coordinate the field trips, I was "elected" or more appropriately, outnumbered. We have almost 300 people in our database, most of whom I have never met but who like keeping up with birding activity. For the last seven years, I have loved working with such a wonderful group of people who share their love of birding.



Courtney Weatherby

I am the Community Outreach Manager for Alabama Audubon. I've spent time as an educator and naturalist with environmental organizations in the Florida Keys, South Carolina, Alaska, and Virginia before making the move to Alabama. My interest in birds started thanks to a coworker while spending time in the low country of South Carolina and I have since become intertwined with my passion for education and stewardship of coastal ecosystems.

Carol Furman

I have been involved with BirdFest for several years as a kayak guide, boat tour guide, and land-based guide. I have also presented workshops such as Birding 101, Advanced Birding and Fall Warblers, and teach a Birding 101 class through the Eastern Shore Institute for Lifelong learning (ESILL) program. My love for birding and the natural world is evidenced through my enthusiasm in sharing my knowledge with others.



William Lilly

I am a life-long naturalist and conservationist; being raised in the Deep South fostered my love of nature. I like sparking interest in the natural world by sharing my passion with others. I believe if people are involved with nature and wildlife, they will be better equipped to join in conservation efforts.



Donald Dehm

I live in Foley Al and have for the last few years, before that I resided in North Alabama. I enjoy various outdoor activities including taking photos of birds and wildlife, but I don't know if I would call myself a wildlife or bird photographer, just a person with a camera who likes to take photos of birds and such. I began slowly enjoying the birds in our backyard, it didn't take long before I fell in love with the birds and the fun and excitement of identifying the various species. A bit of an awakening into the birding world was when we had an unknown bird appear at our feeders. It was a medium sized bird, kind of brownish black with blue-ish hues and bright red eyes, after some research we found out it was a Bronzed Cowbird. Then the many visitors came to see the bird and I began to see the passion and the love that others had for birds of all kinds, I knew then that I wanted to do more with birds and so began the buying of books, learning online, etc.



Duane Miller

I have a life-long interest in all things nature, plant or animal, and have spent hundreds of hours in Blakeley State park and other public parks, with camera in hand, always searching for something new or different. Anything photographed that is unknown to me, I research until its identity is known. My interest in all things in nature led me to a Master's degree in Biology.

Becky Lee Humphries

Foley is where I call home, while the Shoals area holds a special place in my heart as my hometown. Our move to Foley led to an unexpected discovery - a birding paradise right in our backyard. It was a delightful surprise when the 19th bird I logged on eBird turned out to be a state rarity, and that's when we got a warm welcome into the vibrant birding community. What started as a hobby quickly turned into a cherished pastime, and I found myself exploring the diverse bird species of Alabama. Along the way, I also discovered the joy of nature journaling—an enriching practice that enhances my understanding of birds and their identification. As a relatively new birder, I feel honored to have been asked to guide during Bird Fest 2023. This will be my first time guiding, and I'm thrilled to meet more of the birding community during these guided trips.



Olivia Morpeth

Born and raised in central New Jersey, I graduated from Delaware Valley University in 2018 with a BS in conservation and wildlife management and a minor in business administration. I worked at the Mercer County Wildlife Center in college, rehabilitating orphaned, injured, and displaced native wildlife. I came to Alabama in the fall of 2018 to intern at the Orange Beach Wildlife Center. Starting in April 2019, I interned at the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge in Fort Morgan, protecting sea turtle nests and collecting data through predation observations and excavations to determine hatching success on refuge beaches. During my time at the refuge, I also participated in Alabama beach mouse trapping surveys as well as beach nesting bird surveys for snowy plovers.

Roger Clay

I am a wildlife biologist with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Working for the Nongame Wildlife Program within the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, I have worked on numerous projects from bald eagle restoration, shorebird and songbird surveying and management, to working with threatened snake species. I also administer falconry permitting in Alabama. I have over twenty years with the District V offices in Spanish Fort.



Ruby Rolland

I am a coastal biologist for Alabama Audubon and a lifelong lover of nature. I graduated from the University of Nebraska Lincoln in 2021 and worked with birds every summer during school and since graduating. From piping plovers in South Dakota to quail in the plains of North Texas, I am happy to have landed in Alabama. My true love for birding was spurred by coworkers three years ago during a summer in the plains of North Dakota. Now birds are enmeshed within my everyday life and, as a Nebraska native, the coast is wonderful change of scenery and species!

Fred Bassett

I am a certified master bird bander who has worked with birds for over twenty years. I travel each summer to study hummingbirds in western states and have done research in Alaska and Canada. I have banded more than 35,000 hummingbirds in more than 1,000 locations from Miami, Florida to Haines, Alaska. During the winter, I document western hummingbirds wintering in south Alabama and Florida. The last fifteen winters I have captured more than 2,000 hummingbirds of ten different species in that area.



Jay Burdette

I live in Fairhope with my wife Kim, both of us are originally from the Birmingham, Alabama area. I retired in 2018 after a 40-year career with Alabama Power Company, the state's largest utility. I managed large power plants for the last half of my career. I currently serve as Vice President for Mobile Bay Audubon and I am a life member of Dauphin Island Birding Sanctuary (DIBS). DIBS is a nonprofit organization dedicated to land preservation of wildlife habitats on Dauphin Island.



Eric Haskell

I have had an interest in birdwatching since having my “hook bird” pointed out to me as an 8-year-old living in Kenya. The bird, an Egyptian Goose, led me to realize there was more to wildlife than mammals, and I became increasingly interested in birdwatching while traveling in North America, Europe and Latin America. As a former Everglades tour guide and subsequently as a Park Ranger, I began leading birding trips until joining Central Texas Audubon, where I became co-President for several years in the 2000s. Currently, I volunteer for Alabama Audubon doing shorebird surveys, and assist as needed with other birding adventures.

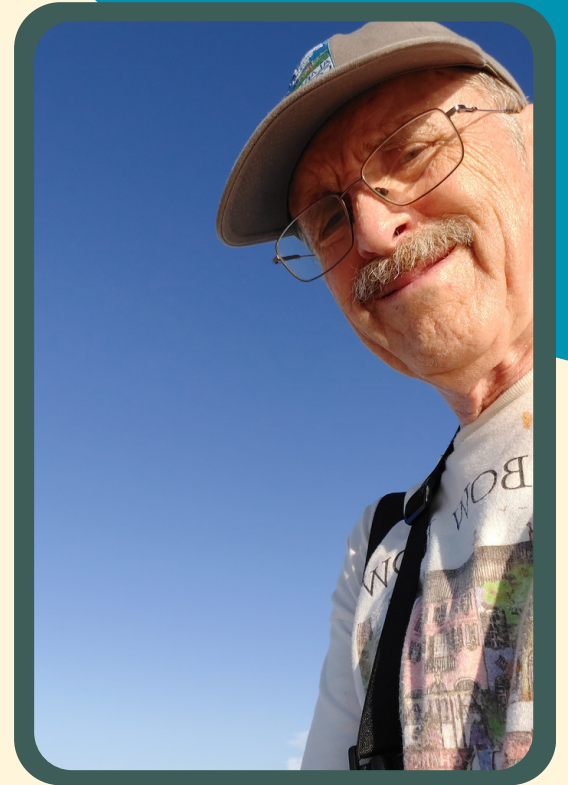


Michael Sandoz

I am 24 and from the Mississippi gulf coast where I started birding when I was 10. I have guided at the Birdfest since 2017. In high school I worked for the Audubon Coastal Bird Stewardship program and the Pascagoula River Audubon Center. I got my Bachelors in Polymer Science and Engineering from The University of Southern Mississippi and I got my MBA and a Masters of Industrial and Systems Engineering from Auburn University. Some of my favorite places I've gotten to bird and photograph are Colombia, the Galapagos, Alaska, and south Texas.

Larry Gardella

Birds in south Florida wowed me, but I really became a birder in 1978 when I started seeing beautiful birds right in Montgomery's fields and woods. Since the early 1980's, Andrea and I have traveled across the world spending much of our time watching birds. Since early 2017 we have lived in Daphne near great birding sites - including Bayfront Park/Village Point Preserve to which I can walk along the Bay. Since 1978, I have been a member of Alabama Ornithology Society (AOS), serving on the board, working on the breeding bird atlas and summer bird counts, and leading bird walks. For almost as long, I have been conducting breeding bird surveys for Fish and Wildlife and compiling Christmas Bird Counts. Since 2019, I have been doing coastal bird surveys for the Alabama Audubon Society. For Alabama Birdfest, I have served as a guide and coordinated the guiding. I love seeing and hearing birds, learning about birds, and helping others to see and enjoy birds.



Andrew Haffenden

I have been interested in wildlife since childhood and became more focused on birds when I moved to the US from Australia in 1993. My personal interest and focus are shorebirds, and I professional guide bird tours both internationally and domestically. I am on the executive boards of the Alabama Ornithological Society and Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, Inc., a member of the Alabama Bird Records Committee and committee member of several Government and non-Government bird conservation entities. I volunteer extensively for Alabama Audubon coastal stewardship program, focusing on the management and protection of breeding plovers, terns, skimmers and oystercatchers on Dauphin Island. During the winter months I also conduct stranded and salvage (dead) turtle surveys for NOAA.

Michael Jordan

I am a Retired Environmental Scientist from 25 years with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. I was born in Mobile, Alabama. My interest in Dauphin Island began over 50 years ago with visits to the shell mounds with my great aunt. I am the top birder on eBird for Fort Morgan State Historic Site with 249 species observed. I am a local naturalist with a special interest in birds and plants. Since my retirement, I have been traveling the world (20 countries) observing birds.



Terri Withee

I have been involved with birding for about 10 years now. My baby brother Andrew, an Ornithologist and an Environmental Scientist, took me on a field trip where he was netting and tagging birds in the California wilderness. It was so magical that I was hooked after that and sought out a local birding group called the Eastern Shore Birders. They then put me in touch with the Mobile Bay Audubon Society. I volunteered with Birdfest, went on many field trips with the Eastern Shore Birders, and joined the Alabama Ornithological Society (AOS). I am a Navy Veteran with 20 years of service retiring as a Chief Warrant Officer in the Supply Corps. I have been married to my wonderful husband Jerry for 49 years and we have three children and six grandchildren. My latest adventures took me to Panama, Belize, and Guatemala finding all kinds of new birds on my life list.



Rebecca Bryant

I am a member of the American Institute of Architects and the Principal of WATERSHED. I have a firm focus on creating sustainably built environments that inspire a greater connection to the natural world. I am a registered architect, as well as a permaculture designer. I am the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Fellow and the first Living Building Professional in the state of Alabama. I lecture frequently, and divide my practice between architectural design, consulting, and education, in order to cultivate and grow the market for resilient, healthy, high-performance buildings in the deep south.



Ben Garmon

I am a 68-year-old birder living in Mobile, Alabama. I started birding at age 20 in Birmingham, where I lived until I was 50. I moved to Mobile to take a job with Mitsubishi and am still working there. I am one of the top eBirders in Baldwin County and a member of the Alabama Ornithological Society, Alabama Bird Records Committee.

Ben Raines

I am an environmental journalist, filmmaker, and local nature expert. A longtime newspaper reporter, I've won more than two dozen awards for my coverage of environmental issues and natural wonders in Alabama and on the Gulf Coast, and coauthored several peer-reviewed papers published in scientific journals. I wrote and directed *The Underwater Forest*, an award-winning film about the exploration of a 70,000-year-old cypress forest found off the Alabama coast. I also wrote and produced the documentary *America's Amazon*, which has aired on PBS stations around the country and been distributed to public schools across Alabama. My underwater film work has appeared in documentaries on the Discovery Channel and National Geographic TV. I am a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts with a degree in filmmaking. I am also a U.S. Coast Guard-licensed captain, giving tours of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and Alabama's barrier islands. I live with my wife and son in Fairhope, Alabama.



Eric Soehren

I attended Jacksonville State University for both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Biology. I have been with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resource's State Lands Division since 1997, serving as a biologist with specific focus on nongame wildlife, particularly birds and herps. I currently manage the Wehle Land Conservation Center (a facility of the State Lands Division) in Bullock County, Alabama. When not administering the day-to-day operations of the Wehle Center, some of my responsibilities include conducting field surveys for rare and poorly known faunal species, wildlife restoration initiatives, and several nongame monitoring and research projects. Most of my work is performed on conservation lands acquired through Alabama's Forever Wild Land Trust Program.

Mark Watts

I started off really getting involved in Underwater Photography 30 years ago, selling stock photos to magazines, I even managed to get into USA today and a couple of books. I really got into bird photography about 8 years ago as part of me wanting to be a Nature Photographer. I've since retired and quit globe-trotting the earth and live full time in an RV. For the past 2 years I have been crisscrossing the USA chasing the light and many, many birds. I've learned so much about birds in the past 8 years that people think I'm a birder. Actually, I'm still the nature photographer whose primary subject is birds.



Chris Wiber

I'm a proud life-long resident of the great state of Alabama. My earliest childhood memories are of boating, kayaking, and canoeing. I'm a U.S.C.G. licensed boat captain and A.C.A. trained kayak instructor. I have been a wildlife guide and educator with WildNative Tours for over a decade during which time I have introduced thousands of people to the wonders of our local ecosystems.



Cynthia Freeman

I have enjoyed a varied professional life as a Naval Officer, Registered Dietitian / Nutritionist, Cooking School Director & instructor, and an anatomy & physiology instructor. With working and raising a bunch of kids, I admit that I have spent most of my adult life fairly oblivious to the presence of birds. That all changed seven years ago when I moved to Dauphin Island. My obsession started with an innocent question posed to a group of people with binoculars staring up into the trees, "what are you looking at?" Since that day I've been hooked, learning everything I can about birds in our area and anywhere my travels take me. I am a member of Alabama Ornithological Society (AOS) and a volunteer with the Alabama Audubon Society. I am also a board member for Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (DIBS), whose main purposes are the acquisition and preservation of important birding habitat on Dauphin Island as well as educating the public about the importance of conservation. As part of DIBS outreach, I also participate in introducing the public to the world of birding through informal bird walks during spring migration and working with Banding Coalition of the Americas bird banding events on D.I. Retiring on Dauphin Island has proved itself to be the perfect place to share my love for the outdoors with my husband, Tim, my children, and my nine grandchildren.



Betsy Eager

I have been interested in birds and birding activities for the past 30+ years while living in Mobile, Alabama. After several years learning to identify birds while joining local birding groups, I realized that I was very fortunate to live close to a major migratory bird flyway on Dauphin Island and in Baldwin County. I was able to develop lifelong connections with other birders who have taught and inspired me to develop my passion for birds and bird habitat conservation. Working as a special education teacher for 40 years kept me busy but now I am able to enjoy the freedom to pursue birds in my retirement. I am the current treasurer of the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries and assist with their mission to protect and preserve bird habitat on Dauphin Island.



Ann McLaurin

Dauphin Island seduced me into becoming a serial birding addict: the birds, the people and the inimitable setting overpowered me. Although I grew up in the “best in everything” state of Texas, I readily and seamlessly assimilated into Alabama culture. I received my Ph.D from the University of Oklahoma and taught political and diplomatic history at LSU-S for 30 years. After retiring I moved to Rock Creek in Fairhope but continued to look for more elbow room which ended in the acquisition of a 6 ½ acre site in Daphne. Thus, I became a novice gardener and inveterate, though not always successful, creator of bird and butterfly habitat. Although I remain an aficionado of opera, classical music, art history, mysteries, and football, learning about gardening continues to be an elusory art.



Collin Stempien

I am the Coastal Bird Technician for Audubon Delta, based on the Mississippi coast. I am a Mobile native, a graduate from the University of South Alabama, and I have spent my life on the Northern Gulf Coast, living between Alabama, Texas, and Mississippi. I have had a love for birds for well over a decade and have spent countless hours birding my home away from home, Dauphin Island. This is the place I was drawn to during even my earliest years of birding, and the place where I really caught the “birding bug.” This special island, and its people, also inspired me to pursue a career in bird conservation and research. As an undergrad, I volunteered with Alabama Audubon, running Audubon Coastal Bird Surveys and helping with projects throughout the year. Since then, I have spent my entire working career focusing on birds and conservation, starting out as an Avian Surveyor for The University of Southern Mississippi, performing various duties at a songbird banding station in Splinter Hill Bog, in southwestern Alabama. Since then, I have worked as a Coastal Bird Technician for Audubon Delta, focusing on coastal bird conservation and research, primarily centering around species such as Snowy and Wilson’s plovers, Least Terns, and Black Skimmers.

