

Birding Bids Farewell to Paul Hess

320 (!) Articles Later, the Magazine's Most Prolific Contributor Moves On

When I was in college, a friend and I were surveying for the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas. We'd found a semi-notable breeder for our atlas block, and my friend remarked, "This means we'll get to call Paul Hess. He's the nicest person I know."

Paul was at the time the foremost authority on the status and distribution of the birds of the western third of Pennsylvania. He delighted in "talking birds" with anyone, even kids. Check that: *especially* kids. Paul was an amateur ornithologist of the highest caliber, but he was something else: an inculcator, a light and inspiration for the next generation of bird lovers. That was the 1980s. He'd fit in perfectly in the 2020s.

Hold on a sec. Paul Hess does indeed fit right in at the present time. I get a chuckle

Paul Hess (front, center) leads a field trip on a fine spring morning. For decades, birders have thronged to Paul's outings for learning, discovery, and good cheer. Photo by © Tom Moeller.

This is Paul Hess's last entry in *Birding* magazine's venerable "Frontiers in Ornithology" (formerly "News & Notes") column. Don't worry! Paul's not going anywhere. His friends in western Pennsylvania can still expect to go birding with him, and we at *Birding* and the ABA look forward to occasional contributions from Paul in the years to come.

Four of us, with rather different life stories—and varied "Hess stories"—offer our thoughts on how Paul has influenced and inspired us over the years.

out of how a lot of newer birders are shocked to learn how old Paul is. (I don't want to give away all his secrets, but suffice it to say he's in his ninth decade on this Earth.) Paul is completely at ease in the presence of *anyone*, of any persuasion or any generation.

I imagine it has something to do with his long and distinguished record of "real work" as a newspaper journalist. Paul was on the front lines of history as it unfolded in the second half of the 20th century, mixing with everyone from mobsters and polluters to environmental activists and celebrated figures in

the civil rights movement. The consummate reporter, Paul is accurate, respectful, and fair.

He very nearly became a scientist, and he's stayed on top of the scientific literature since his own college days long ago. I also chuckle at how a lot of birders—young and old alike—imagine that Paul Hess must be a museum or university ornithologist.

What happens if you combine scientific acumen and journalistic excellence in the same person? You get the most prolific contributor, by far, in the whole history of *Birding* magazine. Paul's entry in this issue's "Frontiers in Ornithology" is his mind-bending *three hundred and twentieth*. He's written standalone articles, too; he's contributed online content; he has served as a judge in the Young Birder of the Year contest; and more. And that's only his ABA portfolio! I'm not sure how to quantify it, but Paul has to be one of the most productive figures ever in Pennsylvania field ornithology; and he has been a popular content generator



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for National Geographic guidebooks.

I could go on, but I don't want to lose sight of the most endearing, and most enduring, thing of all. I've met literally thousands of birders since I was a teenage volunteer for the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, and I still haven't met one nicer than Paul Hess. Now if you'll excuse me, I found a rare bird today, a distributional outlier, and I need to go call Paul Hess. He's the nicest person I know.

—Ted Floyd

TF is Editor of Birding and an ornithological author.

There was a simpler time in my life, when my only goal was to be an expert birder. I dreamed of becoming an authority on birdlife, the sort people would write to with questions, asking how I might interpret an odd observation.

The bimonthly arrival of *Birding* magazine was integral to that end. And while I looked forward to every part of the magazine, the erstwhile "News & Notes" column was a standout. As much as I wanted to identify the most challenging species, what I really aspired to was to be an ornithologist, a student of the bird world driven by the spirit of science. To me, the science of birds—no coincidence that this was the name of my first science blog—empowered us to go further than identification and list-keeping, and to find stores of wonder

in all that we have yet to learn about birds. I saw, and still see, ornithology as a grand project, diverse as birds themselves.

And so, every other month, I'd pore over Paul Hess's latest dispatches from the frontiers of ornithology. It only took a few issues before I aspired to share Hess's far view, eyes faced ahead toward the unknown, the not-yet-understood, even the never-yet-imagined.

Of course, in my aspiration toward this far view, which Paul so ably kept alive, I never imagined that one day I would work beside him. But with the great privilege of some well-connected mentors who believed in me, the stars would eventually align. The young dreamer was brought under Paul's wing. The challenge of sharing ornithology was placed in my nervous hands.

Since then, the proverbial ink of my writing has appeared in more than 20 issues of *Birding*. From my early start in the magazine to a now more comfortable tenure, Paul's guidance has been warm, steady, and generous. Far from "News & Notes" being his strictly controlled opus, Paul made sure the column was a platform where I could develop my own style, chase my own leads, and, ultimately, come into my own as a science writer. This has been the finest—and rarest—form of mentorship.

I keep my start as a blogger close at heart. And in this regard, I still have much to learn from Paul, who spent his career in journalism, the business of storytelling. For my part, I still



feel like I'm getting started, like a fledgling before its first molt. But with Paul as a role model and mentor, I feel a little more sure of my first flight.

So Paul, I thank you for your years of contributions to the magazine, a true labor of love for birds and for our community. I thank you for your helping me find my wings. And most of all, I thank you for whetting the ABA community's appetite for discovery, and reminding us, in each and every issue, that we have much more to learn.

—Nick Minor

NM is "Frontiers in Ornithology" Department Editor and a graduate student at the University of Wyoming.

Paul Hess is the sort of person you feel as though you have known all your life—and certainly wish you had.

On so many local outings in the Pittsburgh area, Paul has shared his remarkable knowledge of decades of natural history in western Pennsylvania. I remember with particular fondness an occasion when I got to hang back with Paul in an oversubscribed outing—and I enjoyed as delightful a trip as those at the front.

I have had the pleasure of birding in the lower Rio Grande Valley with Paul. I loved every moment with him in the field and at the dinner table. Paul would sometimes slip away, and I later learned he was busy talking with one of the van drivers about Celtic piping. On this same November trip, our group encountered other birding luminaries, all of whom wanted to meet Paul—a regular occurrence at Magee Marsh in May, as well.

I work in biomedical research at the University of Pittsburgh, and I began sending Paul articles from the scientific literature to which I had access and in which I thought he might be interested. And boy howdy was he interested—in everything from the most cutting-edge avian genomics to the earliest origins of birds in the fossil record. He also recognized that others would be interested, and so our distribution list has grown, thanks to Paul's generous nature and introductions. It is especially



gratifying that many folks at *Birding* and the ABA benefit from the list, and I'm grateful for the many connections Paul has made.

On the side, Paul and I have fed each other's love of Black American music, a. k. a. jazz. Paul would hit jazz clubs in New York City during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and I love his tales of hearing John Coltrane and Miles Davis at the Village Vanguard as much as he loves my sending him the latest from the current Pittsburgh jazz scene.

Among his diverse roles in the newspaper business, Paul performed stints as an arts and entertainment editor. As a result, the depth and breadth of Paul's knowledge and direct experience go far beyond jazz. Just one of many examples: Paul obtained a prize-winning painting from the Woodstock Music and Art Fair—yes, that one! Over the years, he has interacted with scores of iconic figures, among them Martin Luther King, each with a delightful story.

I majored in Biology and American Studies in college, and now “major” in birding and jazz as an adult. Who better a mentor than Paul Hess?

To paraphrase the exceptional writing of this exceptional human being, upon meeting Paul, “If the quark-governed universe permits a {friendship} in less than instant, I {befriended Paul} pre-instantly.”

Thank you, my friend and mentor.

—Michelle L. Kienholz

MLK is a science writer at the University of Pittsburgh and compiles a biweekly digest of the ornithological literature.

One of my earliest interactions with Paul Hess was while I was writing my first-ever “publication”: a trip report for a bird walk at a city park, featured in *The Peregrine*, the esteemed newsletter of Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Birding Club.

As the newsletter's editor and one of the club's founding members, Paul—better known as The Venerable Hess in these parts—teased that perhaps he wouldn't publish the report until I became a member of the club. Clever move, Paul. I dropped my membership form in the mail the next morning.

That spirit of community-building is fitting for someone with such deep appreciation for local birding. Since the early 1970s, Paul has amassed detailed knowledge of the comings and goings of the birds at a county park near his house, Harrison Hills Park, logging well over 1,000 visits by himself and with his numerous mentees.

This unpretentious task captures Paul in a nutshell. His humble, good-natured demeanor belies his extraordinary dedication, his uncanny attention to detail, and his ability to instill in others a love and curiosity for the natural world.

I have come to understand these traits in Paul through his science writing, which I first became acquainted with when Paul reported



on my own ornithological research. He might not have realized it at the time, but Paul's questions for me illuminated fundamental flaws in how I was communicating the research at the time, making me resolve to become a better science communicator.

People who are passionate about learning and sharing science couldn't ask for a better role model than Paul Hess. When he covers a topic, he seeks to understand it well, communicate it clearly, and key in on where it fits into the broader arcs of ornithology and conservation biology. Paul's work has earned the praise of birders and ornithologists in all corners of Pennsylvania and across the ABA Area. To see what I'm talking about, look at this impressive outpouring of admiration for Paul, compiled by Paul's longtime friend and field companion, Jack Solomon: tinyurl.com/Hess-tributes, starting on p. 4.

Paul's individual contributions to ornithology are significant in their own right. But his influence is magnified through all of the ornithologists, amateur and professional, who have been molded by his writing, leadership, guidance, and mentorship throughout the years.

Paul brings out the best in people. His mentorship has made avid, detail-oriented natural historians out of many a novice birder, both young and no-longer-so-young. His quick and self-effacing sense of humor makes fast friends out of strangers. And many readers of this magazine, or of any number of his book contributions, articles, and newsletters, can count him as a mentor, as well.

It is bittersweet to be reading the last *Birding* column by this eminent contributor, once described as the “esteemed, wise, mighty, and Venerable” Hess. But he leaves scientists, birders, and journalists an example and a vision to follow. Thank you, Paul, for your leadership and your friendship.

—Tessa Rhinehart

TR researches avian conservation at the University of Pittsburgh and is Secretary of the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee. 🌍