

Stephen W. Kress

**POT OF GOLD:** A rainbow arches high over Hog Island, Maine, since 1936 the idyllic site of a summer camp for birdwatchers and environmental educators.

## Back to the source

*This year at Audubon's iconic Hog Island Camp, an influential instructor wore the student's clothing*

When all seats had been taken and the dory stopped rocking, I turned to Jack Padalino, retired director of the Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC) in Dingmans Ferry, Pennsylvania, and noted, "Well, that was fun."

"Yeah," Jack echoed. I waited for more, but there wasn't more.

Deep in the process of taking it all in and catching his breath, Jack took a last look at the Great Blue Heron rookery as our boatman pulled away from the island's rocky shore and started the short ferry run to our mother ship.

Then it was back to the Audubon camp on 330-acre Hog Island, in mid-coast Maine's beautiful Muscongus Bay, for dinner, the checklist, the evening program, and a rundown of tomorrow's programs and field trips.

About what you would expect from birding camps in general and from this one in particular (since many of the institutions that we take for granted were likely forged here).

I think it was then that I realized what I wanted to write about my stint as a camp instructor. Two stories were here: one involving birding's iconic camp, the other involving a registered participant. Both are institutions in their own right, with decades of accomplishment in their wake.

Fact is, few institutions have contributed more to the study and enjoyment of birds than the Hog Island Camp. Likewise, few individuals have made a more indelible imprint on environmental education than Jack.

It was Muhammad going to the mountain with an environmental twist

— and maybe a lesson in meaning and significance for the rest of us.

### Hog Island

Let's start with the camp. Its history stretches back to 1936, when the National Association of Audubon Societies hosted its first adult camp on the island. It wasn't called the "Hog Island Camp." In the May-June issue of *Bird-Lore*, the bi-monthly magazine for Audubon members (and the precursor of *Audubon* magazine), the enterprise was referred to simply as the "Audubon Nature Camp."

The article "The Puffins Await You!" laid out the purpose and focus: "Here, teachers, youth leaders, and all who are interested in birds, marine life, wild flowers, and insects, may know them intimately, under the guidance of young,

enthusiastic naturalists. From this camp, armed with definite programs, the camper may return to his community to interpret... the ways of wild creatures to the children of the American schools."

That's right. It was a teacher's camp. The subject was a field of natural history that would one day be known as "environmental education."

For decades, teachers and naturalists attended the camp (many of them supported by scholarships awarded by Audubon chapters scattered across the country). In the forties, fifties, and sixties, it was a rite of passage. Anybody who was anybody who was interested in birds went to the Hog Island Camp.

It conferred upon graduates a degree of singularity. It gave you a sense of being anchored in the birding community at large. It spread the environmental gospel far and wide, and best of all, it was a whole lot of fun.

You got to see Atlantic Puffins — not to mention Roseate and Arctic Terns, Razorbills, Black Guillemots, a bunch of breeding warblers, and a glut of Common Eiders — and you got to spend quality time with people of like mind from all across North America.

I'm delighted to say that in AD 2010 very little has changed. Camps are now six days long instead of two weeks. Campgoers are primarily new bird-watchers who want to increase their skills and knowledge base rather than formal educators who aspire to pass on camp-gleaned wisdom.

But the instructors — including Steve Kress, founder of the successful seabird-restoration program known as Project Puffin ([www.projectpuffin.org](http://www.projectpuffin.org)); Scott Weidensaul, field researcher and author of *Of a Feather* and other acclaimed books; Kenn Kaufman, contributor of this

magazine's regular "ID Tips" column; and other well-known figures — are just as dedicated to the camp's founding principles as that first tier of leaders back in 1936. They included a young artist named Roger Tory Peterson and a young photographer named Allan Cruickshank.

Lots of history. Lots of pride. And something more. Much more.

### Jack Padalino

The day I first met Director Padalino, he was on his knees fixing the floor in the dining hall of PEEC ([www.peec.org](http://www.peec.org)). The building had earlier served as a Pocono Mountain vacation retreat called Honeymoon Haven. By the time the bungalow enclave had morphed into an environmental-education hub, it was in need of more than a little repair.

The program room still had a heart-shaped dance floor beneath the chairs. The bungalow doors, when opened, played the musical theme to the movie *Love Story*. Couples of long standing could renew their vows while sitting on a granite seat boasting a large carved heart.

"You can tell people you met the director directing nails into boards," he quipped at the time.

It was the autumn of 1975. I was a 25-year-old birding nobody hanging onto the coattails of a guy named Floyd P. Wolfarth, who was a birding friend of Jack's and who had taken a liking to me. I doubt Jack even remembers the meeting.

"Granola munchers" was how Jack referred to the small army of environmental educators who did one- and two-year stints at PEEC. In time, I joined their ranks, taking part in Jack's tent-pole events, eagle- and hawk-watch weekends on the Delaware River, summer camps, and youth programs.

## Hog Island Ornithology Programs 2011

**May 29-June 3:** Seabird Biology and Conservation

**June 12-17:** Joy of Birding

**June 19-24:** Field Ornithology and Maine Coastal Birding for Teens

**July 17-22:** Ornithology for Educators

**September 11-16:** Bird Biology and Conservation

For course descriptions and registration, visit [www.projectpuffin.org](http://www.projectpuffin.org)

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Photo: Orange-breasted Falcon by Marianne Phillips

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#### Feb 19 – March 2, 2011:

Oaxaca, Mexico

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Peter Nilsson, *Whimbrels* (detail)

Like the other granola munchers, I was learning the field and people skills that would serve me the rest of my life. Floyd was my mentor, Jack my organizational role model.

In addition to being an accomplished educator, Jack was an astute businessman. He looked clear across New Jersey and saw the market potential of New York City and started offering birding weekends at PEEC at the incomprehensible rate of \$39 per person.

This included dinners, lunches, breakfast, evening programs, and transportation to and from birding spots. I know it sounds crazy, but he packed his weekends. He gave attendees more birds for the buck than anyone else and remained solvent.

At the height of his career, he boasted that PEEC was running more students through its doors than any other environmental-education center in the Free World. And his perspective was probably apt. For several years, the Soviets hired him to develop educational programs on their side of the Iron Curtain, too.

During his 30-year tenure, he served on multiple boards (including that of the National Science Foundation) and assorted think tanks. In short, if you were in the environmental-education field, you knew Jack, and if you didn't, then you felt his influence.

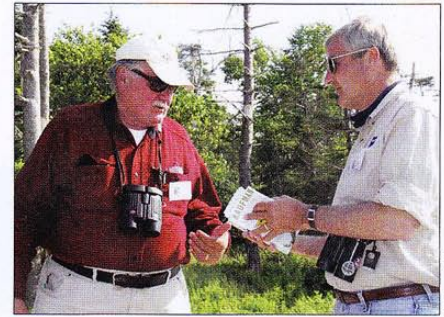
Now 70, retired for almost a decade, the august educator spends most of his time on the road — birding, of course, and using bird festivals and Elderhostel (now known as Road Scholar) as his vehicles for engagement.

He is, I assure you, an accomplished birder — one of the best. So what was he doing at an Audubon camp populated mostly with inexperienced birders? Why was the instructor wearing student's clothing and sitting in on lectures that he might have given himself?

Because all good things have a source, and like vows, things with real value must at times be reaffirmed.

### Kissing the birding stone

Hog Island closed its doors in 2009. Maine Audubon, which ran the camp, found itself in the same financial crunch many institutions experienced after the stock crash of 2008. The Hog Island program was shelved to help close the budget gap.



**ROLE MODELS:** Pete Dunne (right) chats with Jack Padalino at the 2010 Hog Island Camp.

But institutions as revered as this don't die easily. All of us in the environmental-education field shuddered when we heard the news. Some resolved to reset the clock and revive the program.

Steve Kress, who had once served as camp director, offered to jump-start the program and run it through Project Puffin. Scott Weidensaul took it upon himself to muster leaders — and happily, he thought to ask me. And Jack? It turns out that the one thing Jack had never done in his illustrious career was go to Hog Island. To his mind, visiting was tantamount to an Irish expatriate returning to kiss the Blarney Stone or a devout Muslim engaged in the hajj.

One environmental institution meeting another. I was the witness.

"Yeah, fun," Jack echoed again as the dory lined out toward the waiting boat. Which is, after all, what birding is all about. Fun, and all the friendship, wisdom, and experiences gained along the way. I'm sure Jack would tell you the same thing.

And maybe this, too:

If your life is steeped in birds, then you owe it to yourself to visit the Source. If you have just discovered birds, there is an island where you can get a crash course in field birding that will link you to birding's past and vault your skills into the future.

By the way, the granola, served as a side dish at breakfast, was the best I've ever tasted. Truly. And the clam chowder? Out of this world. 🍪

Pete Dunne is vice president for natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society, director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, and the author of *Prairie Spring: A Journey into the Heart of a Season*; *Bayshore Summer: Finding Eden in a Most Unlikely Place*, and other books.