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Apparently fearless Pacific Union College biology professor Floyd Hayes matches smiles with a tiger in the Hansen Collection of PUC's Donald V. Hemphill Museum of Natural History. Hayes' interest in ornithology has taken him to far flung reaches of the globe. The tiger stays put. Carolyn Younger photo

Pursuing flights of imagination

By Carolyn Younger

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Thursday, January 31, 2008 12:26 AM PST

Pacific Union College biology professor Floyd Hayes is intrigued by strays — the winged variety that wobble off course during migratory flights and end up in unexpected neighborhoods.

One of these was a black-tailed godwit, a handsome wading bird with long legs and a long, slightly curved bill. This threatened species is a European that regularly migrates from the English coast to western Europe, Africa, South Asia and Australia.

In 2000 Hayes was both surprised and delighted when he spotted one wading in an Orange Valley mud flat in Trinidad — it was a first for South America and for Hayes, who calls it "The best bird I've ever found." It tops his list of nearly three dozen "best birds" spotted over the course of his 45 years, 33 of them devoted to ornithological study of one degree or another.

It was also the time when he longed for a high-powered camera to capture the moment. Instead he cobbled together a makeshift telephoto lens by lining up the lens of the family camera with a telescope and snapping

the godwit as it raced away, wings flapping.

What a life

In PUC's Clark Hall last Thursday, between appointments with students and preparations for a nine-day trip to the Galápagos Islands, Hayes talked about his life's calling and the countries it has taken him to.

In addition to working in Ecuador, Hayes has found rare birds in just about every country he has lived for any length of time. His list of off-course birds also includes a Laysan albatross discovered in the Caroline Islands, an Arctic tern in Paraguay, the black-whiskered vireo in Tobago, an Eurasian collared dove at St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands and an Iceland gull spotted almost in his backyard in Lake County.

Hayes has had a lot to say about these and other birds. The list of published or accepted-for-publication monographs and technical papers he has authored or coauthored fills five pages. And they aren't all about birds.

He and his identical twin, Bill — that's William K. Hayes, a professor of biology who teaches behavioral ecology, herpetology, ornithology and conservation at Loma Linda University's Department of Earth and Biological Sciences — and several others worked on two papers on the behavior of the giant Galápagos tortoise. They watched the tortoises sleeping, they observed their defensive behavior.

The pair also coauthored, with Bill taking the lead, a paper on the venomous bite of the Eastern garter snake, and on the cardiac responses of rattlesnakes during courtship.

And when news came out of Arkansas of an alleged sighting of a Great ivory-billed woodpecker, the first seen in 60 years, the two wrote a paper weighing the evidence which included a blurry four-second video and a recording of bird calls and double knocks. Their decision: Many ornithologists are holding out hope that the bird is not extinct, but hope is fading without more clear-cut evidence.

Snakes came first

Birds first caught Floyd Hayes' attention when he was a 12-year-old growing up in Maryland. Before that it was snakes, an interest triggered when his dad found a little green snake during a family vacation.

In sixth grade, football and baseball were on his mind but the following year he and his brother both received the same secret-Santa gift at school — Roger Tory Peterson's "Field Guide to Eastern Birds."

"What got us into it was this little life list and I marked off the birds — I think I marked off my younger brother, Rob's list, too," Hayes said. "I've seen most of them by now ... Then we started writing down state lists, but the more I looked at birds the more I got interested in the biology."

That didn't mean there weren't snakes in the house. The boys brought home water snakes, garter snakes, black snakes, whatever they could find. In spring there were also chatty tree frogs and peepers.

Although their parents, Bob and Carroll, drew the line at poisonous snakes, somehow a pair of pigmy rattlesnakes spent several below-the-radar days in the family camper before being smuggled into the twins' bedroom. A poisonous and feisty cottonmouth, captured during a family trip to Mississippi for a wedding, traveled back to Maryland in a suitcase packed in the car-top carrier without their parents' knowledge. Next came a Timber rattlesnake. Worried that any one of these could escape, the boys managed to transfer the more dangerous snakes to nearby Columbia Union College for safe keeping.

It was only later, when Hayes entered the live collection in a church fair, that his father realized the extent and nature of his sons' interests. Hayes had carefully labeled the common and scientific names of each snake and where it was caught. The word "Mississippi" made it clear when the cottonmouth had joined the collection and how it had made its way to the Hayes' household.

More than a hobby

In the years since the brothers have pursued their different fields — snakes for Bill, birds for Floyd. He guesses that an interest in birds kept him out of mischief as a teen. It was an intellectual hobby that eventually led to the earning of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Michigan

and Loma Linda University.

And while he agrees that snakes, although hard to find are fun to catch, he finds magic in the study of birds. He is especially keen on finding the vagrants.

"Birds travel long distances," he said, "sometimes half way around the world, and because of this they can get lost and wind up in the wrong place ... It's exciting if you have the possibility of seeing some bird that belongs in Japan or Siberia."

Hayes' interest in birds prompted him to join the Peace Corps as a vertebrate biologist for the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural in Paraguay where he met his future wife, Marta. He has lived, worked and observed birdlife in Micronesia, on remote islands in the Philippines, on the Galápagos, the U.S. Virgin Islands and in Trinidad and Tobago as well as the United States.

Although making bird lists no longer holds the appeal it had when he was younger — mostly because tallying the numbers would be too time consuming — he is nevertheless proud of his lists for Trinidad and Tobago (more than 350 species) and Paraguay (more than 500). He estimates his world list amounts to 1,500 species, most seen in South America.

He also has a listing of "big days," when he and a group of fellow ornithologists and birding enthusiasts spotted record numbers of species in a particular territory. On several occasions his brother was part of these teams.

Adventure stories

Over the years Hayes' love of the outdoors has grown to include camping, rock climbing, SCUBA diving and snorkeling — all pursuits that blend nicely with birding, he believes.

He's studied the habits of endangered birds such as the White-tailed sabrewing and the Trinidad Piping-Guan. And notes jotted in one of numerous small notebooks over the years reminded him that a Tropical mockingbird he was observing in Trinidad, a female, had red above white markings on the left leg, and white above red on the right leg, as well as other interesting traits.

These same mockingbirds frequently have expanded households — one male and two females sharing a nest as they incubate eggs and rear the young.

Less exotic, perhaps, but just as detailed are notes he made on martin nests in power utility poles near Kits Corner in Kelseyville. It's all there: a map showing the location of poles, their spacing, the number and height of nests, surrounding vegetation, number and sizes of males and females and the date and time observed.

He has had numerous adventures over the years, including being given a spur-of-the-moment tour of a Philippine island by members of the local penal colony.

Hayes — on several occasions with his wife and son, Brett — paddled a rubber dingy across several miles of ocean to a remote island in the Virgin Islands to observe a colony of Sandwich terns and Cayenne terns. The trick, he recalled, was to drop anchor then snorkle down to make sure the anchor was properly set before swimming to the beach, avoiding any sharks in the area.

On to Galápagos

Hayes was a biologist with the Division of Fish and Wildlife in St. Thomas, the U.S. Virgin Islands, before joining the PUC biology department in 2003. He currently teaches a variety of courses, including the principles of ecology, marine sciences, vertebrate biology, animal behavior and the natural history of California.

This week he and his wife are in the Galápagos helping to build a school, a project coordinated by an Adventist group, Maranatha Volunteers International. When he was there 24 years ago Hayes was studying the habits of the Galápagos tortoise. This time around he is the group biologist, his wife is one of the translators.

In addition to pointing out the flora and fauna Hayes will be muscling cement blocks into place and putting his carpentry skills to the test.

He is also hoping to come across a Lava heron, a small bird full of mystery.

But a mystery he has the tools to unravel — notebook, telescope, camera and patience.