

Theodore H. Below Bio

Theodore H. Below Elected Honorary Member of the Florida Ornithological Society.—Ted Below provides a fine example of an amateur birder and conservationist who moved to the rank of “professional” later in life. Ted was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1924. World War II and the Marine Corps interrupted high school; marriage and a family interrupted studies at Columbia University. A wide variety of jobs eventually channeled him into becoming a licensed Master Plumber and owner of his own business.

In 1955, he and family moved to Naples, Florida, where he practiced the plumbing profession for 35 years. Here he also served for 16 years as a member, often chairman, of the Collier County Environmental Advisory Council, where he earned the enmity of developers and their fellow travelers. Ted’s mother, Lilla Below, well known to the older birders in Florida, was a bird watcher for many years. While Ted resided in New York, she failed to interest him in the activity. The same was true after they all moved to Florida, until the mid ‘60s when she conned him into participating in a Dry Tortugas Sooty Tern banding trip. There he got hooked. For 15 years he was a member of these banding parties, and soon became a stalwart in all meanings of the word. Try as I and others (e.g., Ralph Schreiber) might, we could not match Ted at capturing adult Sooty Terns out of the air with long-handled “crab nets.” Ted became so expert at this challenging sport that he only went for banded individuals and often then only for a “double” with one sweep. It was on these many memorable (the stories are legend) Tortugas tern banding trips that Ted was first exposed to numerous ornithologists, and Ted “caught the bug.” He decided he too wanted to add to the knowledge of birds.

In 1972 Ted began working with Ralph Schreiber, “the pelican man,” by monitoring Brown Pelican populations along the southwest coast of Florida. Soon Ted incorporated other coastal waterbirds (e.g., long-legged waders, shorebirds), and a much larger portion of the southwest Florida coastline, into his surveys.

In 1982 Ted started receiving remuneration for his bird work, by accepting the position of National Audubon Society warden/biologist at Rookery Bay, Southwest Florida. In 1990 much of Ted’s time was transferred to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, where he held the position of Resource Manager. Despite added duties, he somehow managed to continue his monitoring of coastal waterbirds. At age 70 Ted semi-retired. Working one day a week for Audubon, the other six days he continues his extensive waterbird monitoring along the Southwest coast.

Ted’s field work has extended well beyond Tortugas tern banding and coastal surveys. He conducted a five-year, color-banding study of southwest coastal Florida shorebirds. Results include demonstrating that individual shorebirds use at least 200 miles of local coastline, and that large numbers of the endangered Piping Plover from all the major breeding populations winter in the Marco area. Ted also has been a major contributor to the first relocation project for the Florida Scrub-Jay; a research program initiated by Ron Mumme.

Ted has more than 25 years of data on habitat use, population levels, and seasonal trends of about 45 species of coastal waterbirds. These data have supplied the information for over a dozen presentations at scientific meetings, 10 papers in professional journals, and 35 articles in the local Audubon newsletter, newspaper, and several magazines. He has presented hundreds of programs to the local community, and has taught adult education classes in bird watching and bird photography. Ted is a member of several national ornithological societies, and often attends meetings of the Colonial Waterbird Society, where he has participated as an invited symposium speaker.

Ted served as President of the Big Cypress Nature Center for twelve years. During his incumbency the organization shifted from insolvency to a viable operation. Ted regularly attends meetings of the FOS, for which he has served as a member of numerous committees, on the Board of Directors, as Vice President, and as President. Ted provides an excellent example of a person who developed an interest in birds and conservation and eventually became a contributor to these fields. The FOS is proud to honor him.—Glen E. Woolfenden, Archbold Biological Station, Box 2057, Lake Placid, Florida 33862.