

PATCH BIRDING SOUTH SHORE ROOTS

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I was inspired to write this by my friend Bobby Berlingeri, who wrote about his experiences growing up in Lido Beach (*The Kingbird*, 70:1), and how they inspired his love of birds and nature. This essay is mostly based on the eulogy I delivered at my Dad's funeral a decade ago. I delivered that talk with no notes—just from the heart—so regrettably, I have no record to rely on. Maybe this article will help me to recreate that talk.

When I was a child, my family would spend weekends at Cedar Beach, in southwest Suffolk County. The Captree Bridge connecting the mainland to Captree Island and then to Ocean Parkway by way of the drawbridge, had not yet been constructed, so we had to go all the way from Babylon to Wantagh, and south over those bridges, through Jones

Beach, and east to Cedar. My father was an ocean lifeguard and avid surfer, so we would spend long summer days there sitting on the beach and playing in the surf. One day, when I was only about five, I decided to expand my horizons and explore. I wandered west a few hundred feet and was suddenly attacked. Little did I know at the time, nor was I capable of understanding, that I had wandered into the famous (though not yet at the time) Cedar Beach Tern Colony. I was freaking out and crying hysterically when my Dad, who had been watching, scooped me up in his arms and carefully walked me out of the colony. I recall asking him, "What are these birds and why are they so mean?". He replied that they were terns, and that they were not mean. He explained that they were defending their nests and that they were beautiful seabirds to be appreciated. From that moment on, I was fascinated by wildlife and nature.

A couple of years later, the town opened Overlook Beach, to the east of Cedar. In addition, the state opened the Captree Bridge, taking about a half hour off our trip to the beach. My Dad wanted to try out the surf there so that was our destination on one beautiful, clear summer day. By then, I had begun to acquire some rudimentary knowledge of geography. As we sat on our beach blanket, I looked across the ocean, but I saw land not too far away. I was astounded. "Is that Europe?", I asked. My dad explained that it was the end of Fire Island, and how that island had grown five miles from a former position all the way east by the barely visible lighthouse, due to the movement of sand and surf. And now, from that moment on, I was also fascinated by coastal geology. Slowly but surely, my educational and vocational pursuits were being forged. Before long, I was reading Charles Darwin, Marston Bates, and others, which just jazzed me up further.

As time went on, my Dad's interests started to shift from surfing to sailing, and this opened an entire new aspect to my pursuit of natural history. More on that shortly. The transition to sailing was gradual, and we kept up a tradition, on Sunday mornings after church in late winter and early spring, of going over to Captree State Park to walk down the dock and enjoy an ice cream cone. On one memorable Sunday, we were driving back home, going north across Captree Island, when my Dad calls out, "Look at the Snowy Owl, it looks just like the cigar box!". The owl was flying north, paralleling us, so we got great looks. I was mesmerized, and my Dad talked about it for days.

When I was a young teen, my Dad bought me a surfboard, not like the wooden boards he used to build, but a modern fiberglass board, which hangs proudly in our den today. A couple of years later he bought me a 16-foot Lyman skiff with an outboard. Very quickly that boat taught me the meaning of the term "chick magnet", but I digress. I used to load my surfboard onto the skiff and shoot across the bay to Cedar Beach to surf. Full circle. That trip brought me across the eelgrass beds in the shallows off Lindenhurst, which were locally called The Flats. I got into the habit of slowing down and staring into the clear bay waters at the abundant marine life. Before too long I was purchasing a mask, snorkel, and fins to keep on the boat. Instead of staring, I would anchor and dive down into this amazing ecosystem, collecting all manner of invertebrates to bring home and identify. This also gave me time to just sit and study the diving behavior of my once-feared terns and gain insight into their natural history.

My boat opened other avenues of nature exploration, as well. I could anchor and wade in to various bay islands, some manmade dredge spoil islands and some natural flood tide deposits from former tidal inlets, of which I learned there were many before they were all filled in to construct Ocean Parkway. I still have a collection of old maps and nautical charts depicting the location and configuration of those inlets. Exploring those islands taught me lessons like there are no such things as "sea gulls", but rather more specific names of individual species, and that the immature plumages of these birds was not dirt!

The south shore of Long Island provides myriad opportunities to learn about the natural world, and my wife Michelle and I made a point of keeping that tradition and lore alive in our two sons, both now fathers and educators. My quest to learn about nature continues to this day, but it is all because of the foundation constructed for me by my father.

