A CONVERSATION WITH TOM FRENCH: PART II

by Alden G. Clayton

The first part of this interview was published in the October 1989 issue. Part I was concerned with the state Endangered Species Bill, which passed the Massachusetts Senate on December 11, 1989, and was sent to the House Ways and Means Committee. The bill must be reported out of that committee by January 4, 1990, or it will be returned to the senate. The following is the remainder of the edited transcript of the August 23, 1989 conversation with Dr. Thomas W. French, an Assistant Director of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Clayton: And now for a few questions about yourself. Many birders have favorite groups of birds—raptors, shorebirds, warblers, sparrows, for example. Because of your work with Peregrines and Bald Eagles, I would guess that many people think of you as a "raptor person." Is this true? If so, how did you become interested in raptors?

French: Not really; no, I am not solely a raptor biologist. I have probably had more experience with reptiles and amphibians and some seabirds, petrels and alcids. Peregrine Falcons and eagles are getting a fair bit of attention from the Division, because they are the highest priority federally listed birds that regularly occur here. There are specific actions that can be taken to help these birds. We include the Eskimo Curlew on the state endangered list, because it migrates through. There's not much we can do for it in Massachusetts, right now. Sometimes the problem is identifying what can be done.

The American burying beetle used to occur in the state, but no one can even locate it now. Burying beetles are named for their habit of finding small dead animals and burying them several inches underground. Then they lay their eggs and raise their young on the animal carcass in an underground chamber. They formerly were present on Penikese Island, which is a wildlife sanctuary. We have searched quite a bit for them there. We are proposing to do a reintroduction next year. It will be the first reintroduction of an endangered insect of this type in the eastern United States if not in the continent. There's a captive breeding population at Boston University, believe it or not. The original beetles came from Block Island, which is the only remaining population in the East. So we're proposing to do similar sorts of things with an insect that were done with eagles, although I guarantee it won't get the same publicity.

Clayton: There are many pathways leading to a career and life-style centered on nature. Some people grew up with a deep and abiding interest; others became "hooked" as a result of education or some extraordinary experience. Could you tell me something about your own background and education—where you came from, so to speak, with respect to wildlife and, particularly, endangered species?

Tom French is shown with the young Peregrine he rescued by rappeling down to the nest, 330 feet above the street, on the twenty-first-floor ledge of a Springfield building. When the young chick was twelve days old, people viewing the nest on twenty-four-hour cable television in the lobby noted that it was gasping and alerted the MDFW. Despite being "bumped on the head" twice by the excited Peregrine parent during the rescue rappel, Tom removed the young bird for treatment at Tufts Veterinary School's Wildlife Clinic in Grafton. It had choked on a bit of stringy meat tangled around the base of its tongue and blocking the windpipe. On June 1, 1989, on the rappel to return the youngster to the nest (after eight days of care), the adult falcon knocked Tom's helmet off. However, Tom survived unscathed as did the chick, which subsequently fledged. Photo by Dennis Vandal.

French: I grew up with a creek and some woods behind the house but in a suburban setting just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. I did not grow up in the country, really, although my grandparents lived on a farm in Alabama. From as far back as I can remember, I spent an awful lot of time in that creek and nearby ponds catching turtles and frogs and salamanders. As I got older and was able to travel farther afield, I just did more and more and more of the same. I guess in a sense I started off catching frogs, and now I am paid for it, more or less. At that time, there were really no formal educational programs for wildlife management that dealt with endangered species. In fact, the Endangered Species Act wasn't passed until 1973, when I was already beginning to work on a Master's degree. The concept of endangered species is somewhat new, on a big scale. I earned an undergraduate college degree that was premed oriented. Not that I planned to be a doctor—it was just the biology degree that was available at Georgia State University in Atlanta. I went to Auburn University because it was well known for field studies, received a Master's in zoology and then went to Indiana State University and got a Ph.D. in ecology and systematics, again field oriented. I had a two-year postdoctoral stint at Cornell University. But, again, basically in zoology, not in wildlife management. Historically, wildlife management was game oriented—turkey, deer, and bear, and that was not what I was specifically interested in.

Clayton: The local birding folklore now includes a number of your daring encounters with Peregrines on Boston and Springfield skyscrapers. They bring to mind tales of rock-climbing exploits in Yosemite. Do you have a favorite "hair-raiser" that you might share with the readers of *Bird Observer*?

French: Well, first of all, people have asked how much I rock-climb for recreation, and the answer is none. My first climbing experience was in mines in New York. The first climb I ever did was a ninety-five-foot free-rope rappel—in other words, away from all walls, just free open air—down one of our mine shafts for bats with Al Hicks of New York's endangered species program. Al is an experienced climber. My first several climbs were in the dark. I didn't appreciate how far down it was. In Springfield I knew I was going to have to do it to band the Peregrine chicks, because there was no other good way of getting down there. I was hoping at first that we could do it with a window-washing scaffold, which wouldn't seem like it was so high because you have a floor under your feet. I did not plan to do the retrieval of the egg or the retrieval of the choking chick—they just happened as emergencies. There's no reason that you can't rappel with rock-climbing techniques off a building, but I had never tried it. Part of the reason for that is that building managers don't usually appreciate people jumping off their buildings! That's an opportunity that very few people ever get.

Clayton: It has been said that birding is one of the few areas where

amateurs can make a serious contribution to scientific knowledge through informed observations and data collection. As a scientist, what are your views on this topic?

French: Well, there's no doubt about that. In fact, I would hope to expand that to areas other than birders. We had a "salamander watch" program, which has been disbanded as a formal program, but we still get a lot of our important rare salamander sight records and the breeding-site localities turned in by volunteers. They're doing it recreationally, driving around in the spring looking for salamanders crossing the road. It's the same concept as birders going out on the weekend looking for birds. Our winter eagle survey is done primarily with volunteers, amateur energy. And that is, of course, sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation nationwide. The data collected have been used to show the trends in eagle populations throughout the country. People do the same for Peregrines, trying to monitor historic eyries to see if there are any birds coming back in early spring. That has been done by the student Wildlife Society chapter at the University of Massachusetts. Observations of when the Peregrine Falcons fledged off the Customs House were very important for us to know. When I put together the calendar of events for the Peregrine Falcons this year, I looked at the dates, and most of these observations were reported to us from volunteer amateur observers.

We obviously have to be a little careful about taking reports from the public. I do get lots of calls about "your" Peregrines—it's always "your" Peregrines, or in other kinds of reports, it is, "'Your' red fox is in my yard." But with the Peregrines, we've gotten lots of calls of dead ones in Boston. They have turned out to be flicker, pigeon, kestrel, Merlin, red-shouldered, all sorts of raptors—lots of things other than Peregrines. Unfortunately, some have been Peregrines in the past. So we have to take every single report seriously. But what that points out to me is that you've got people that for the most part don't know a thing about birds but at least have heard about the Peregrines. So we are getting some information to people that something is going on and that it is something important. I was on Mount Horrid in Vermont this fall to help improve a natural Peregrine nesting site on a cliff. I was there with my Vermont counterpart and the Peregrine Fund—that is a private organization, which has captive-bred these birds that have been released. I met a woman hiking, and she was telling me all about the birds in Springfield and about these people who were helping them. I thanked her for the information. Great!

Clayton: Looking ahead into the future of wildlife conservation—let's say for the decade of the 1990s—what do you see as both the greatest problems and the greatest opportunities?

French: Well, our greatest problem for wildlife generally isn't really people shooting or killing it. Although people still occasionally shoot an eagle,

the loss of habitat and pollutants like acid rain, PCBs, and lead are much bigger problems. These are things that wildlife biologists really are not trained to cope with. It's going to take more than just wildlife biologists to improve the environment for wildlife. I think that preserving habitat is usually more important than most of the other management and restoration efforts that we can do. If you don't have the habitat, you will never be able to preserve the animal or the plant that requires that habitat. Fortunately, our endangered species land protection effort this past year spent just over two million dollars in Massachusetts for the habitats of rare species. As for environmental review, the Division is getting more and more involved, particularly through the Wetlands Protection Act, in reviewing proposed developments for their potential impact on wildlife, and particularly rare wetlands-dependent wildlife. The Natural Heritage and Endangered Species section of the agency does about eighteen hundred—pushing two thousand—environmental reviews a year. That is not traditional wildlife management but may have more long-term impact than the traditional types of things we have done. It's not glamorous; it's confrontational sometimes; and it's high stress for the staff who do it. Particularly when we have spotted turtles in the great cedar swamp in Westborough, and Conrail is proposing to cover up some of that wetland. It's hard for somebody who is paid peanuts by comparison to stand up to these high-powered teams of lawyers. But we are doing more and more of that.

ALDEN G. CLAYTON has described himself as "continuously awed by the wonders of the natural world and deeply concerned about its preservation." In June 1988 he and wife Nancy regularly monitored the Peregrines nesting on the Customs House tower. When Alden took off for Baffin Island, he missed the fledging of the young Peregrines. This happy event was, however, witnessed with wild delight on June 25 and 26 by Nancy and *Bird Observer*'s editor, who was thus grandly rewarded for chauffeuring Nancy in Alden's absence through downtown Boston traffic.