

## 2016 Goodhue-Elkins Award

*Written and presented by David Donsker at the New Hampshire Audubon Annual Meeting, September 17, 2016.*

The Goodhue-Elkins Award is presented annually by New Hampshire Audubon to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the study of New Hampshire birds. The award is named for Charles Goodhue, one of the state's great pioneer birders, and Kimball Elkins, the model of critical observation and insightful record-keeping.

The 2016 Goodhue-Elkins recipient, Davis Finch, is fittingly deserving of this prestigious award. He has spent his lifetime observing, recording and sharing his knowledge of the birds of our state, and beyond our borders, to birdwatchers and professional ornithologists, alike.

Davis began bird watching as an extension of his interest in the natural world as a child and young man as he explored the forest and fields around his family property in South Kingston. Davis's father bought this property when Davis was merely a year old, and Davis resides in his family home to this day, having carefully observed its flora, fauna and ecological succession over the ensuing years. He is familiar with every corner and nook, boulder and tree of his beloved property. Davis's precocious and growing interest in birds was encouraged by his parents and was nurtured by several of their colleagues at the Exeter Academy who took him under their wings and involved Davis in their birding excursions. While at Yale University, Davis was further influenced by the great professor of ornithology, S. Dillon Ripley, and by his friendship with the late Noble Proctor, who himself became a greatly respected naturalist, and was a protégée of Roger Tory Peterson.

Even as a teenager, Davis began to submit bird records to New Hampshire Audubon. His observation of Blue-winged Warbler in Wilton in 1955 was only the second record of that species in New Hampshire (the first record was of one recorded twenty years earlier) and a harbinger of this species' expansion into the southern part of our state. Into the early 1970s, he continued to regularly submit records while in his twenties and early thirties, notably, the third state record for House Finch in, of all places, Errol in 1967, and the first state record for Fish Crow in Kingston in 1971.

Davis further contributed to the knowledge and distribution of New Hampshire and New England birds when he agreed, at the urging of the renowned New Hampshire birder, Bob Smart, and others, to serve as the regional editor for the Northeastern Maritime region for *Audubon Field Notes* (now *North American Birds*) which he did in the decade from 1967 to 1977.

Using his acquired knowledge of New England avifauna and succumbing to his passion for birds, Davis changed career paths in the early 1970s forgoing his profession as an instructor of French at Yale and



*Davis Finch receiving the 2016 Goodhue-Elkins Award from NH Audubon.*

*Photo by Terri Donsker.*

Vassar to form one of the pioneer bird tour companies, Northeast Birding, which specialized in trips to New England and adjacent Canada. Subsequently, in partnership with Will Russell, Davis founded Wings, which became one of the three major American bird tour companies. Wings gradually expanded its coverage to include tours to Alaska, Mexico, Central and South America in which Davis took an active and principal part. Eventually he focused his interest on Middle and South America, leading more than 90 trips to the New World Tropics, concentrating on Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Guyana. As a bird tour leader, Davis inspired and influenced many of his clients. I can gratefully attest that he changed my life when I had the opportunity to travel with him to South America soon after I became interested in birding in a serious way. In the “green mansions” of the forests of Guyana and the high Andes, Patagonian steppes and the pampas of Argentina, I learned to appreciate Davis’ remarkable field and leadership skills. He was a careful organizer whose incomparable field notes were so precise that he, in the pre-GPS era, could locate with pinpoint accuracy the most obscure territory of species that he had previously scouted, even in the infinite sameness of the Patagonian steppes. He was a thoughtful, courteous and skillful leader with a profound command of bird identification and vocalizations and an uncanny ability to attract even the shiest of birds with his virtuoso command of recorded tapes. The sheer enthusiasm that Davis exuded in these adventures was infectious and eventually led me to my own unquenchable quest to see and learn about the world’s birds.

Davis has shared his knowledge of birds in other ways, as well. He has served as a leader of workshops for The Institute for Field Ornithology in Maine, Mexico, and Venezuela. He was a principal consultant for *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds*, and *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*. He was a consultant for the *Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba* by Orlando Garrido and Arturo Kirkconnell and co-author of the *Field Checklist of the Birds of Guyana*. He has published five papers related to bird distribution in Guyana and co-authored “Pelagic Birds in the Gulf of Maine” published in *American Birds*.

As an expert in Neotropical bird song, he has unselfishly deposited many of his sound recordings at Cornell University’s Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds, including 1,175 from Guyana, obtained from 20 expeditions to that South American country.

He has further applied his knowledge of ornithology and bird distribution by serving on the Rare Bird Committees of Trinidad and Tobago, Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire.

Davis has been a member of three venerable ornithological societies: The Nuttall Ornithological Club, The Linnaean Society of New York and the Ornithological Association of la Plata in Argentina.

Even though his responsibilities with Wings often took him far away from his home, Davis has managed to regularly and actively participate in many years of Christmas Bird Counts as a compiler and participant in Maine and New Hampshire starting in 1951. Notable has been his participation in the Coastal New Hampshire Count for over six decades and serving as a foremost member of the Errol and Pittsburg counts. Davis participated in the Errol-Umbagog CBC for 27 years between 1965 and 2007, serving over half of that time as its compiler. He has been an active member of the Seacoast Chapter of New Hampshire Audubon where, in addition to regularly attending its meetings, he also has led chapter field trips and has given presentations.

Perhaps most notably for many of us in this room, for twenty years, up until the winter before last, Davis maintained a “bird feeder of epic proportions” on his property in East Kingston in the form of a meat pile composed of scraps and bones obtained primarily from local butchers and augmented by an

occasional deer carcass. This was no small amount of carrion. Davis has calculated that over the course of those twenty years, he added 128,000 pounds to the meat pile; just over three tons per year! This mound of bones and scraps attracted a good variety of birds such as crows, ravens, hawks, Bald Eagles and hundreds of gulls. Aside from these avian scavengers, his “feeder” was attended by a host of human visitors from all walks of life from both novice and long-time birders to eagle enthusiasts and biologists. Although the meat pile had attracted rarities over the years, including several Thayer’s Gulls, I suspect that Davis is somewhat disappointed that it never managed to attract a Golden Eagle. That would have been a crowning glory to his substantial yard list. On a more serious side, during the last several years, Davis sent reports of banded gulls at the meat pile to be entered into the database of the Appledore Gull study coordinated by Julie Ellis. But even without the meat pile, Davis’s property and neighborhood has attracted a number of additional rarities that he has enthusiastically shared with others. In recent years this has included a vagrant Ash-throated Flycatcher and, just this spring, another of his first state records...Eurasian Collared Dove.

Perhaps most remarkable of all is Davis’ generosity. Davis’ kind heart and charity extends to anyone who visits his property. He has even ensured that his beloved property and lifetime home, the place that nurtured his own profound interest in natural history, will remain protected for conservation in perpetuity under the auspices of the Southeast Land Trust.

Speaking for New Hampshire Audubon, it is our sincere pleasure to present the 2016 Goodhue-Elkins Award to a most deserving recipient, Davis Finch.

