

ALLOW ME THE HONOR TO INTRODUCE TO YOU: IRWIN WOLDMAN

A profile and interview of a most humble, charismatic, engaging and witty, interesting and lovable figure of the Southern California birding community.

By Louis Tucker

It would really be quite presumptuous and arrogant of me to think that I am introducing a man who actually needs no introduction. Irwin is one of the pillars of the birdwatching community, here in Southern California. If you are new to birding, it wouldn't take you a long time to meet this gracious, open hearted gentleman. He is, in fact, one of the first birders I met back in January 1987, when I arrived in LA. Irwin has been an avid birder, except for the first decade of his life, all of his life. You may run into him while you're out somewhere in the field. He has led countless numbers of field trips for Los Angeles Audubon and other Audubon birding chapters. If you're new to birding, Irwin is the type of birder that you would want to know. He is incredibly welcoming and very open hearted. He also freely dispenses his knowledge and expertise of his more than seven decades of birding experience. He is well traveled, nationally and internationally.

As an aside, one of the things Irwin did for this interview was to give me a type written list of the places he has birded around the world, nearly two dozen places; also including some of the very special birding places in this country. He has made visits to 49 states, 6 Canadian Provinces; and he has traveled as far north as the Attu Island in Alaska, and as far south as an Antarctic Cruise to Antarctica, and basically every continent. The bulk of the international trips were made in the past thirty years, with one special stint in Australia for ten days back in 1957 when he was in the army. There are many impressive places: Kenya and Tanzania with his daughters and Park East Tours from December 22, 2000 to January 2001, the Pantanal, Brazil in December of 2003 with the Pantanal Bird Club led by Braulio A. Carlos, a one day birding tour in August of '05 with a local guide in Cuba, Northern China with Sunbirds with Paul Holt as a guide. The Antarctic Cruise was led by Noah Stryker in January of 2014. It must also be noted that his three daughters threw him a wonderful 80th birthday bash upon his return from the real "down under".

This, in a sense, is truly unfair of me to pick out a few spots, because all of them on this list are worthy of note.

How did this all begin? Irwin told me that his grandparents were originally from Russia; and the Russians, at the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries utilized "pogroms". Pogroms were a system used to wreak havoc, use violence even to the point of extermination against their Jewish population and communities. They would harass, chase, use violence against the Jewish population, pushing them out of their villages and make the villages Russian. It is interesting to note



Irwin, Birdwatching a few months ago. Photo by Sandi Logan



Photo by Debbi Wolman

that even before the maniacal plans of Adolf Hitler, Russia and some other nations used heinous means that were anti-Semitic in nature and deed. (As a side note, in world history, ethnic and religious differences have always been dealt with by one ethnic group trying to destroy another. In the 20th century, Adolf Hitler was certainly the most vile and notorious. But, Josef Stalin also persecuted and exterminated Jews in big numbers in Russia. That's in addition to Russia's history of centuries of atrocities against Jews.)

His grandparents made the decision to migrate west. And, they migrated west to the United States; boarding a boat from Russia to America. At first, to Bradford, Pennsylvania then traveling north some 78 miles and settling in Buffalo, New York. His father was a pharmacist and his mother was a housewife/home maker.

I asked him when he became interested in birds. And, he told me that he was in the Boy Scouts and the Boy Scouts have a system of goals and achievements that gives out merit badges as one accomplishes these tasks. One of the merit badges involved bird watching. (This is an early form of citizen science that, I think in the earlier years of the Boy Scouts helps to build character and along with the other number of tasks one has to do in that organization makes a well-rounded, solid, caring, responsible individual.)

Irwin did a birding outing with his troop, and at 12 years old became hooked. He says he was really excited about seeing birds and learning about birds. You have to know that back in the 1940's this was not something that many people cared about. For a while his older brother would go birdwatching with him and would drive him places. But, eventually his older brother was interested in other things and Irwin was on his own. In the beginning this hobby was something he would do on the weekends. And, this created a bit of conflict, because his mother wanted him to be in Hebrew school on Saturdays. This took some negotiating. After a time of satisfying his mom with the Hebrew studies, he was able to convince her to let him go birdwatch. It became his passion.

He went to college to become a pharmacist, and worked in his father's pharmacy in Buffalo. To this day, he has worked as a pharmacist. He works every other Saturday as a pharmacist. But, I'm getting ahead of myself with Irwin's story.

Irwin's parents met and got married in Buffalo. They had four children of which he is their second child. His older brother was a pharmacist, like his dad. And, after high school, Irwin went to school to become a pharmacist, as well. And, of course, after the training, he had to take state boards, become licensed. He took the boards in New York, and Washington, DC. The boards for Washington, DC made you eligible for every state, except New York, Florida, and California. Eventually, as he needed, he took the Florida and California boards.

In 1956, Irwin enlisted in the army, and did his basic training at Fort Dix, in New Jersey. And he was later sent to Fort Cronkite, in Marin County, in northern California. One of the “kicks” I get with Irwin is his freely using Yiddish with me, because of my background and the community I grew up in, in southern New York and New York City. So, he points out the word “Cronkite” because it sounds exactly like the Yiddish/German word “Krankheit” which means “sickness”. And, we chuckle. He was a medic and he was assigned to the Nike guided missile base. He would set up a first aid station whenever the missiles were being fueled and defueled.

Being in Marin County, he told me he was in a great place to observe birds on migration. He told me: “I noticed Golden Plovers flying through and I reported the sightings to the Golden Gate Audubon Society. And, they told me that they don’t get Golden Plovers, that I must be mistaken”. And, “Who are you anyway?” We laughed. He had a twinkle in his voice. And added: “Now they get them regularly.” (You must remember this is 1956). With Golden Gate Audubon he met the late Rich Stallcup’s parents. And, the Stallcups would take Irwin birding around the area. (Rich unfortunately passed away in December of 2012, after a long illness. He was one of the co-founders of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory).

Toward the end of his first year, he figured he needed to go overseas. He said: “If I didn’t do it at the time I would be stuck in a ‘suck’ job”. So he put in to go to Europe. However, a classification sergeant told him that an allocation for his MOS (military occupational specialty) was available in Hawaii. Irwin said: “Put me in!” He told me that he was all for Hawaii, rather than be stuck in the infantry in the winter in Europe. I joked a little with him, mentioning that in spite of his Russian ancestry, Russia having really cold severe winters, and being

from Buffalo, New York, one of the colder winter regions in the lower 48 states, he is a warm weather man.

So, he is then in the 25th Infantry at Fort Scofield on Oahu. He had continually harassed the sergeant who sent him to Honolulu. The classification sergeant in, Honolulu, realized that he was a pharmacist and wondered if he could type, which he could, so, he was spared the infantry. His office job was to assign soldiers to jobs according to their background. That was a bit out of sync when it comes to what he should be doing. He said he went on only one bird walk with Hawaiian Audubon. And, they took him to the central part of Oahu where they had keys to, as Irwin describes it, a miraculous tropical garden. It had roots shooting up twenty, even thirty feet in the air. And, it had bromeliads hanging down. The place was gorgeous, hot and humid.

During this time, he wanted to take a vacation, before he would be sent back stateside. He wanted to go to some place exotic. He decided against Japan, because it would be too cold in the winter. He put in an allocation for Australia. He would go there through the US government or the UK government which would go through London; but that came back negative. That route would stop at Christmas Island and they were doing atomic bomb testing there and no foreign nationals were allowed. So he went commercial all the way down to Fiji and was on “standby”. That held him up for five days. He then decided to go commercial all the way to Sidney. He “kicked” around Australia for two weeks by bus and at the end got a “hop” with British Hastings back to Fiji. This was his only time in Australia. And, he told me that the then current Australian bird guide was not a very big book at all - more like a magazine. From Fiji, he got a reservation on a cruise ship and went from Suva to Honolulu. He said he didn’t see a

lot of birds on the ocean. On the ship he met up with a Canadian and another American. And, they radioed ahead to rent three new Chevy convertibles. They went “joy riding” around and the group expanded to sixteen other travelers. At the end, they had to drop off two cars in Waikiki, and the sixteen piled into Irwin’s rental and as he dropped the gang off at their ship, he, of course, is caught by an MP, who asked: “Are you in the service?” Irwin replied: “Yes.” And, he wrote Irwin up; but, Irwin said that he was going to be rotated back to the states anyway.

Back stateside, he had done his New York and Washington, DC pharmacy boards for licensing. And, he went down to Florida and took those boards. When they shipped him back to California, he sent for his books to study for the California boards. He got his license to work in California. And, he worked part time in Oakland. Then they shipped him back to Hawaii. They allowed him to work in the pharmacy until the next state boards came around; but, he decided not to take them. “i had enough of those boards”, he said.

After being discharged, he went back to Buffalo and worked with his father in one of his father’s stores for two years. At this point, he decided that California was definitely calling and he told his family: “I love you” but he had to go to California. His parents didn’t understand this California “thing”. But, the first summer he was in California, his parents came out to see what the draw of California was. He took them around to all the sites. And, the second week, he took off, and drove them around, up the coast to Monterey, Carmel, San Francisco, Yosemite and Las Vegas. After that, they never questioned the California decision again. He’s been here ever since, except when his father had a heart attack, he went back to Buffalo one summer to work in his father’s pharmacy. And, then returned to California—he was not going to suffer any more Buffalo winters.

Irwin was married for nineteen years, in 1963 and divorced in 1982. He has three very accomplished daughters: Sandi Logan, a casting director; Debbi, who travels around the world hosting various corporations; and Tami, an educator in a private school in Los Angeles. After his divorce, he sold his pharmacy in 1983 and worked as a pharmacist part time. Meanwhile, he became a commercial real estate agent. First he worked as a business broker, selling business to business. Then he went into commercial real estate. He didn't want to do the home real estate business for a few reasons. He didn't want to deal with the petty haggling over things like: "I don't like the color of that fence" or, I don't like the fixtures in this place. And, he wanted his weekends to go birding.

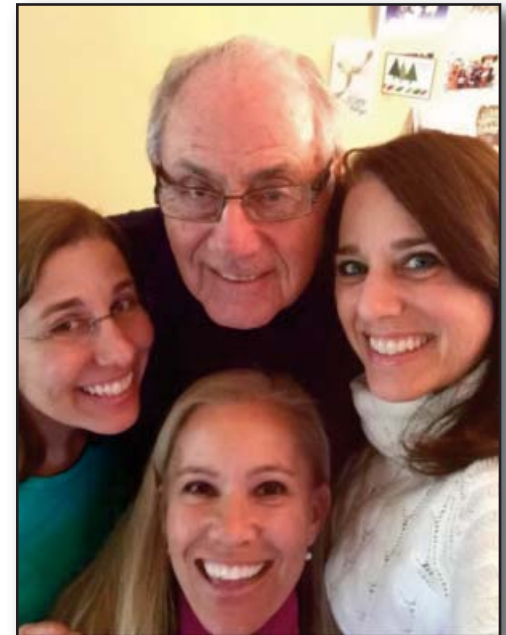
There are wonderful constants in Irwin's life: family, pharmacy, and let us not forget his passion for birding. I gather from our conversations that it really doesn't matter what birds he's watching - it's that he's watching creatures with feathers. He told me though, that lately because of little sight difficulties and he does favor things like gulls and terns. I've been out with him, on walks and field trips numerous times. I have carpoled with him on these trips numerous times; and he never lets us pay him for gas. He is a man who is generous on many occasions. I also remember sharing a tent with him in southeast Arizona, some eighteen years ago. We met up with a number of birders from around the LA area to scour as much of southeast Arizona as possible on a holiday weekend.

For this interview, or I have to admit, interviews, we first went to Malibu Lagoon. LA Audubon had purchased for this interview a digital recorder. And, when I picked Irwin up in Studio City, we started talking and the recorder was working and then for some reason, the recorder just stopped working. So, with much embarrassment, I asked if we could redo

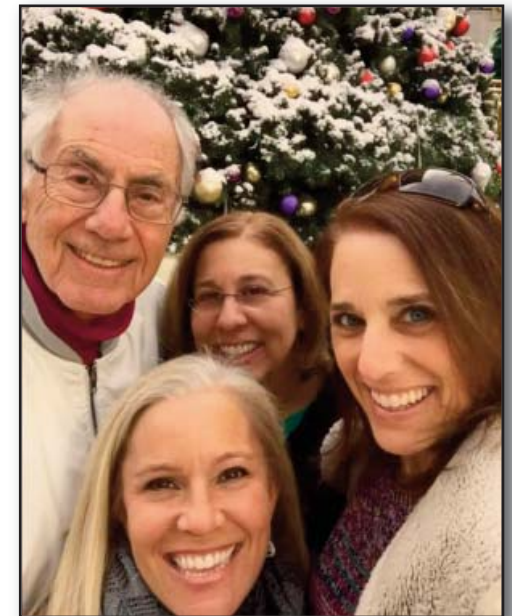
the interview. He was willing to do it again, and I chose to do it on the Ballona walk. I worked with the recorder. I even had a technician check it out. I was doing the right things with it. So, I picked him up several weeks later and we did the Ballona walk, which happens every third Sunday of the month. This time everything we talked about was recorded. And, both times this kind man took me to lunch. That's the kind of "mensch" Irwin is.

I would certainly be pretty remiss if I didn't mention Irwin's international birding travels. Already mentioned is the travel to Australia for 10 days in 1957 by himself. But, from January of 1990 to May of 2017, he has been to a lot of great birding spots around the globe. In January of 1990, in January, 2-10 he visited Attu Island and Anchorage, Alaska with ATTours. In December 2000 to January 2001 he was in Kenya and Tanzania with his three daughters with Park East Tours, led by Peter Kjuguno. In July of 2001 with a trip sponsored by Vent and led by Marshall Iliff and Bob Sunstrom, he observed Arizona Hummingbirds. In August of 2002 he did High Island and Bolivar Flats in Texas with Vent, with the same leaders. He's done Costa Rica, the Pantanal in Brazil, and the Dry Tortugas in Florida. He spent one day in Cuba. And in Panama, stayed at the Canopy Lodge, Canopy Tower in El Valle which was a Vent tour.

In May and June of 2007 found him in Northern China for three weeks with Sunbirds led by Paul Holt. December 21, 2008 to January 5, 2009, he was in South Africa on the Western Cape and Karoo with Rockjumpers led by Simon Bellingham. In May of 2011 for three weeks, he was in Vietnam from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi, again with Vent led by David Bishop. His trip to Antarctica started in Buenos Aires, Argentina and then to Usuaia, Argentina where the group took boat trips to local islands and land nearby. That was January 7-9 and the January 10-19 in 2014 was the Antarctica Cruise with One Ocean Tours led



Irwin and his three daughters. Photo by Debbi Wolman



Irwin and his three daughters this past December. Photo by Sandi Logan

by the expert birder and author Noah Stryker. And, in his return to LA he was feted with an 80th birthday bash thrown by his daughters. In December 2014 to January 2015, he and other LA birders led by Jim Moore went to Bosque Del Apache, New Mexico. February 6, 2016 found him in the United Arab Emirates. Then he was on his way to Northern India for 10 days with Rockjumpers. And lastly, from April 30 to May 7 he went to Wild Spain, in 2017, with Birdquest led by Dani Lopez-Velasco.

He told me during lunch, that he would like to go to Iceland. Also, he doesn't get upset or troubled if he's on a bird tour, or on a walk if he misses seeing a bird. I get the feeling that he takes in what he can and has no regrets about what he doesn't see or doesn't do.

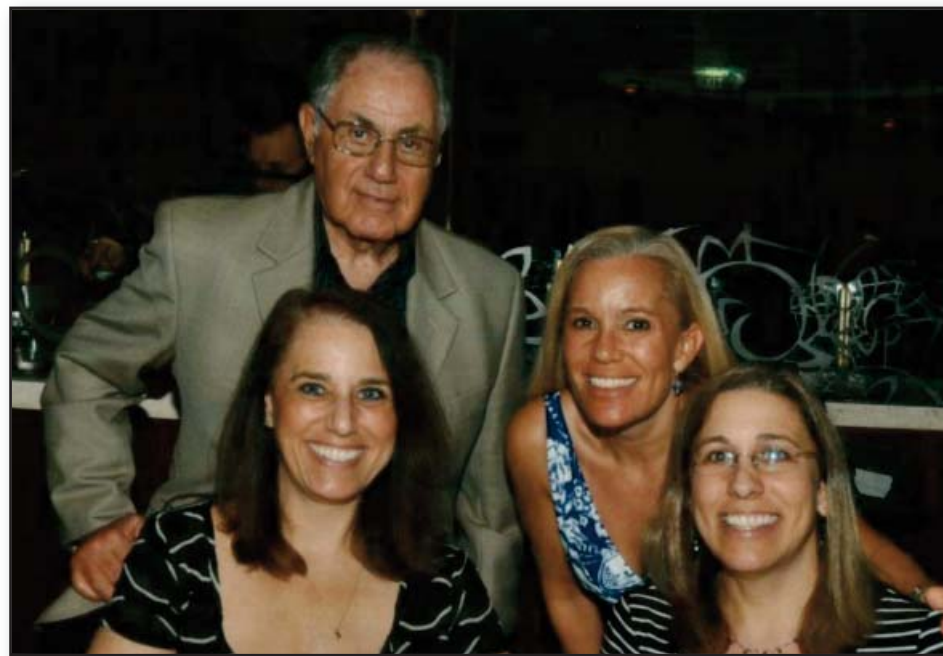
I don't know about you; but, I am impressed. When we were about to leave Malibu Lagoon, we met a young couple who had just gotten into birding. They were just starting their walk around the area. I watched Irwin's whole countenance light up. He talked to them about what we had already seen: the beautiful Osprey that was sitting on a small snag on a small island to the left of the path as you start out towards the beach. He mentioned the Gadwall pairs that were there and some of the other things around with Killdeer calling as we were talking. But, as I perceive his nature, he was filling them with the birding information of the day. And, he was giving them suggestions as to how to keep connected with these fine feathered creatures. And, the lovely couple was happy to receive the tips.

I will also add this: Irwin connects with new faces and invites them to join him, to follow along. He takes email addresses and for many years sends out birding information to those who wish to stay connected. He's been doing this for years. I privately call him our birding social director. He keeps up with many of the Audubon chapters around southern California. And, when he was driving, he would invite people to carpool with him. And, now that he has given up his car and driving altogether, friends come and pick him up; or, he uses Uber. He is out birding whenever possible. He is also faithful to his family, where he has relatives all over the country. And, he flies back and forth for family events, frequently.

There is another thing I admire about him: during lunch at Jerry's Deli in Studio City, while he was talking about his part time pharmacy work, some of which he does pro bono, the importance of keeping your mind active. He is constantly learning. And, that is great wisdom. I totally agree with this; because I also believe that when you stop taking in information, and augmenting your knowledge in some way, (constantly learning), you are dying, not only a physical death, but a death intellectually. Somehow you shut off your mind, and that is not necessarily a voluntary action. Whenever I've met up with Irwin, he tells me and shares with

others something new. I witness this when he, every month or so, hands me several birding and nature magazines. It's also apparent as he keeps up working even part time as a pharmacist. He shares a lot of this information freely.

He also has an incredible wit, an impish wit. And that wit gives way to more puns than you ever could imagine exists. He's a genuinely good natured guy, even in these days where he has a few physical challenges. He "soldiers" through. I don't think I've ever seen him depressed, or even down. He knows and accepts his limitations; but, he fights on. I love the fact that he's not "down and out". I, personally, have great admiration and respect for this man. He has a lot to give and we can learn so much from him; not only about birds, but, also about life. Because Irwin Woldman lives life, he's constantly searching and finding new things. I have witnessed his talking about a number of the trips he's taken around the world. One that really sticks in my mind was at his 80th birthday bash when he talked almost rapturously about his Antarctica trip, almost down to every detail. He tells a good story. And, it's a story that makes you want to get up and plan a trip to these places. I hope he gets to Iceland. And, I know, upon his return, there will be a wonderful recounting of what he experienced. It's an honor to know you, Irwin Woldman, and to be your friend. 🐦



Irwin with his three daughters. Photo by Debbi Woldman