



VILLAGER BACKSTORY

You may know Mark Cudney from the golf course, but what you may not know is that he is one of the best birders in the United States, having spotted 912 species of birds in the country.



Rachel Stuart | Daily Sun

GETTING TO KNOW MARK CUDNEY

Age: 67
Village: Fenney
Spouse: Cori
Family: Three sons, one grandchild on the way
Moved Here In: 2021
Moved Here From: Sacramento, California
Favorite Villages Activities: Golfing with friends, going on outings with The Village Birders



Kristen Fiore

THE VILLAGES DAILY SUN

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Mark Cudney said when you think you're going to die, your life really does flash before your eyes.

He would know. Cudney was in a plane crash in Alaska and was a passenger on a capsized boat in Bodega Head, California. He's been bitten by the two most dangerous spiders in North America: the black widow and brown recluse. And spiders aren't the only thing that has bitten him. A copperhead snake did as well. And if all of that wasn't enough, Cudney has come face-to-face with two grizzly bears.

All in the name of birding. "My birding adventures have gotten me in trouble," chuckled Cudney, of the Village of Fenney.

Cudney is the sixth best birder in the U.S., having spotted 912 species of birds in

the country. He has birded in all 50 states and all 10 Canadian provinces.

Cudney grew up in East Lansing, Michigan, and went to college at the University of Michigan. He got his master's degree at the University of Georgia and got a law degree at the University of the Pacific.

He spent 40 years as a lawyer and part-time judge, and out of the more than 1,000 trials he conducted, he said he never lost one.

"I knew when to settle and when to go forward," Cudney said. "I rehearsed my clients like it was a play. If we were going to spend the money to go to trial, we were going to win."

But Cudney said the job was increasingly adversarial. Birding was something fun he could do.

In 1981, Cudney visited

Lassen Volcanic National Park and spotted his first and favorite bird — the Western Tanager, a yellow songbird with a bright orange head. At the time, he didn't have binoculars, so he looked through the lens of his camera.

Shortly after, he started taking a class on the identification of shorebirds at American River College and became fascinated with birding.

Alaska is Cudney's favorite place to bird. He has been there 34 times and said he is the No. 3 birder in the state, even though he has never lived there.

He also has been to Arizona and Texas about 40 times each since those states are hotspots for finding new birds.

"All the rare vagrant birds that migrate the wrong way (go) there," Cudney said.

Sometimes, Cudney will

hop on a plane or behind the wheel of a car just to spot a bird. He once flew to St. John's in the province Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada and back in three days for a bird. One recent Sunday, he drove five hours to Kendall, Florida to see a bird, looked for two minutes then drove 5 hours back home.

He's been to all but about four of the national parks in the U.S.

Every day, he checks all of the birding hotlines to see if something rare shows up. If it does, he looks at how far away it is and decides if he's going to go after it.

"Getting a new bird on your life list is a big thrill," Cudney said.

That doesn't happen much anymore, but just getting outside and looking at birds is a thrill for Cudney, too.

"Every day, you'll see different birds in the same place," he said. "You don't know what you're going to find. Birds move around so much because they can fly."

Now that he's in Florida, Cudney's focus is exploring the whole state and even the ocean looking for birds.

"I'm expanding my Florida state list," he said. "I never birded in the northern part of the state. It's great up here. There are so many birds that live in this state and don't live anywhere else."

In the meantime, Cudney enjoys golfing with a group of friends. He said he is a single digit handicapper with a 4.5 index. He also has been on a few outings with The Village Birders.

"I met a lot of people," he said. "They're an enthusiastic bunch, which makes it fun."

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