

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Catching Up with Sarah Swank

By Karen Doss Bowman '91

Since retiring from Bridgewater in 2007, Sarah Swank is still in the same home on the edge of Bridgewater's picturesque campus. But she hasn't stopped exploring the world.

Passionate about conservation and the natural world, Swank and her husband, Jon Kastendiek—a retired JMU biology professor—are amateur bird-watchers who recently returned from Bhutan and Assam in India, where they saw about 360 species of birds. About 190 of those species were new to their "life list," Swank said.

"Birds are beautiful and varied, but their behavior is not flexible," said Swank, who estimates that she and Kastendiek have seen more than 3,000 of the world's 11,000 species of birds in the years since they began birdwatching. "Most bird species can survive only where natural habitats remain. These places are beautiful and complex. Jon and I have spent our careers in understanding and advocating for the conservation of the natural world. But in a sense we are in a race against time, to see these places before they are lost to the demands of an exploding human population."

Swank, who joined the College's biology faculty in 1981, always enjoyed taking her students on Interterm trips, including excursions to Costa Rica, Africa, the Everglades, the Bahamas

and Bermuda. After her retirement, Swank was a faculty member for UVA's Semester at Sea during the 2009 spring semester, teaching courses while sailing and stopping off at ports throughout Europe, Africa, India and Asia. She taught another full semester with the program in spring 2013 and did a shorter summer term in 2011 with a trip that was focused on the Mediterranean.

"I always loved teaching field courses," said Swank, who taught courses in ecology and evolutionary biology. "My first love has always been the natural world, and field courses gave me the opportunity to directly share the wonder with my students. I also believe that first-hand experience is the best teacher in any discipline."

Swank, whose father James Russel Swank graduated from Bridgewater College in 1932, stays active at home and during her travels. She enjoys weekly walks with her college roommate, as well as playing tennis and golf. A member of a local book club, Swank loves reading novels—author Martha Grimes is one of her favorites—and added, "I don't read things that will scare me."

Swank and Kastendiek share their home with Angus, their 8-year-old Scottish terrier.

Committed to lifelong learning, Swank has taken numerous courses at Bridgewater since retiring, including courses in art history, sociology and Spanish. She also has explored her musical gifts and in recent years enjoyed singing in Bridgewater College's Oratorio Choir performance of Gabriel Faure's *Requiem*.

"That's something about me that would probably surprise my former students," said Swank, who also belongs to a faculty movie club. "Biologists are often very musical. I'm still learning new things. My husband jokes that I'm the 'poster child for retirement.'" —

