

He's wrangled a live shark, stalked striped mullet and spied on birds for more than 20 years. The Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Dr. John Dindo also has been named one of Alabama's Outdoor Ambassadors for 2006.

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When Dr. John Dindo talks about birds and fish, sitting still isn't always an option. His arms jut out, rising at the elbows just short of a flap as he mimics the way a reddish egret spreads its wings when stalking a snack. Then, his office chair squeaks to life as the scientist frantically taps his feet around on the carpet, imitating the leg movements of the egret as it dances for dinner.

Dindo knows his subject well. For two decades, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab educator has traveled by boat dozens of times a year to document an avian breeding ground on nearby Cat Island.

Egrets fascinate him, he said, because of their natural beauty, their ability to adapt to change and the way they skulk about in shallow water come supper time.

Dindo created and manages the award-winning Discovery Hall, the K-12, teacher-training and public outreach programs of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab as well as the Estuarium, the lab's public aquarium.

"John is a dynamo," said Dr. Bob Shipp, chairman of the Department of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama. "He totally bubbles over all the time. His kids catch it. The students that he teaches, they are just infected with his enthusiasm. He's one of a kind."

Named one of 15 Alabama Outdoor Ambassadors for 2006, a photo and profile of Dindo can be found in this year's Alabama Vacation Guide, a 160-page magazine-style primer that highlights outdoors destinations across the state.

In 2000, Dindo was recognized nationally when he received the James Centorino Award from the National Marine Educators Association, given for distinguished performance in marine education by non-classroom teaching professionals.

"We're not making big, bold statements," Dindo said of the educational programs he oversees. "We're making them open their eyes to what's out there, the link between land and water. We want them to go away with a greater understanding of the world."

Dindo's understanding of the world was shaped by a college professor, when the former student took a class on oceans at a Methodist university in Alaska. "This old guy was just enamored with the oceans," he said, "and that class set me in motion as to what I wanted to do."

Dindo, 57, grew up in Vermont, was drafted in 1966 and joined the U.S. Air Force. He learned enough Russian to intercept spy messages, copying code for the government.

After eight years in the service, Dindo earned a bachelor's degree in fisheries ecology - in two and a half years - at a college that eventually became the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Then, he headed south to further his education at the Sea Lab through a master's program with the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

In his first three years at the lab, Dindo tracked striped mullet by boat in a 50-mile stretch from the Delta to the Gulf of Mexico clear to the continental shelf in search of where the migratory fish spawn. Later, he turned his attention to birds.

David Yeager, director of the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, said Dindo has a gift for making science come alive for people who aren't scientists.

"His role running the Discovery Hall Program is a major factor in connecting Alabama's schoolchildren and their teachers to our natural resources," Yeager said. "I think Discovery Hall is one of the best things that's ever happened here."

Along with his wife, Charlene Dindo, the scientist was awarded the citizen/educator of the year award from the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. He also has served as president of a local Sierra Club chapter.

Dindo met his wife, now a teacher in Baldwin County, at the Sea Lab more than 25 years ago. They have two sons.

"The best thing about John," said Tom Hutchings, owner and manager of the environmental consulting firm EcoSolutions, "is he decided from the get-go that education is the way to make things happen and affect positive change. He's committed himself to that, from very young children to the education of educators."

In the coming months, Dindo will be mapping avian breeding grounds throughout southern Alabama for the Mobile Bay National Estuary Project. He'll also be collaborating with Dr. Ken Heck, who works at the Sea Lab as well, on a project that considers how bird droppings make sea grasses grow.

Dindo also has received several grants to develop teacher programs on aquatic nuisance species, biotechnology and integrating math and science skills with marine science curriculum.

"He lives and breathes the outdoors," Shipp said, adding that Dindo's interests transcend political lines. "He's totally respected by everybody who's involved in outdoors" issues.

Dindo also has developed a minority teaching fellowship program, funded by Shell Oil Foundation, to increase opportunities for minority teachers and student teachers to

become marine science educators, according to Lisa Young, a spokeswoman for the lab. She said the program typically enrolls two or three fellows each summer.

His work doesn't slow down for summer. Dindo teaches a college-level course called "Coastal Birds of Alabama," and oversees other warm-weather programs including day camps for children using Global Positioning System technology, week-long summer camps for middle school students, a four-week program for high school students and teacher training.

Colleagues say Dindo is one of the main reasons the Sea Lab is recognized as Alabama's Center for Ocean Science Excellence in Education by the National Science Foundation. Credited as one of the prime resources in the creation of the Coastal Birding Trail, Dindo received his doctorate from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in biology, specializing in ornithology.

Impressive credentials aside, friends said Dindo is the kind of guy you want beside you when tangling with a live shark, in or out of water.

"If you are driving down to Pascagoula and the wheel falls off your trailer, he'll be there," Shipp said. "Having said that, he's the world's worst golfer and he shot a hole in a boat once trying to subdue a shark."