

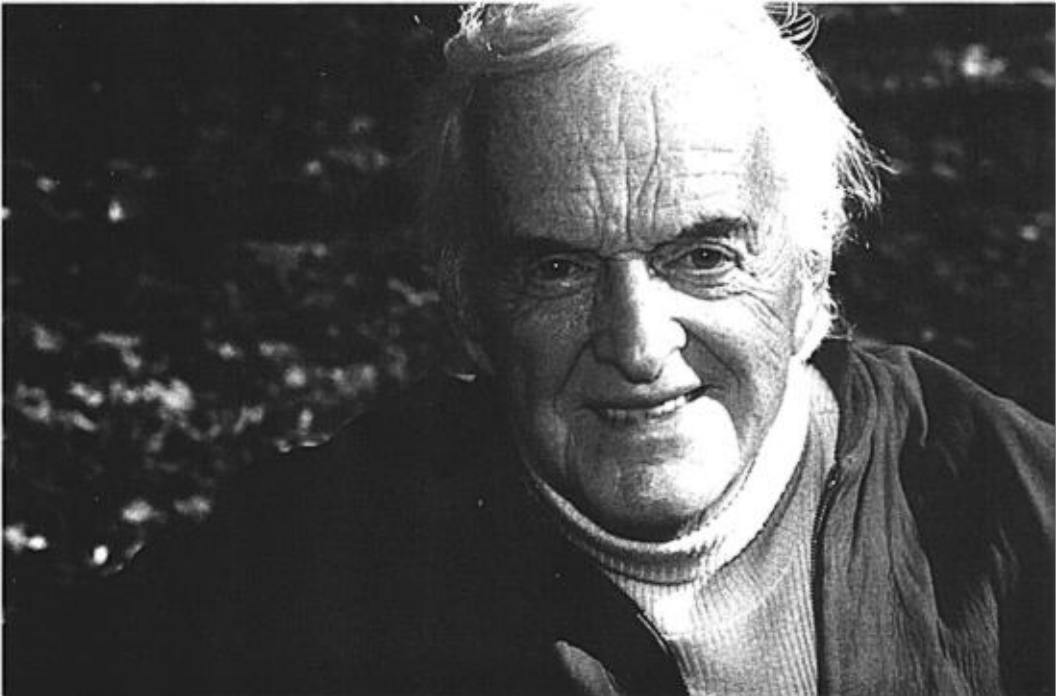


The Auk 115(2):465–469, 1998

IN MEMORIAM: ROGER TORY PETERSON, 1908–1996

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ROGER TORY PETERSON, 1908–1996

(Photograph taken in 1994 by Susan Roney Drennan)

When Roger Tory Peterson died on 28 July 1996, he was one month shy of his eighty-eighth birthday. He was born on 28 August 1908 to immigrants Charles Gustav Peterson, from Varmland, Sweden, and Henrietta Bader Peterson, from a little town near Breslau, Germany (now Poland). The place was Jamestown, southwestern New York, at the eastern end of Lake Chautauqua, about 25 miles from Lake Erie. As a young child he became entranced by the beauty of nature and became a practicing naturalist at the age of eleven, when he was introduced to birds in his 7th grade classroom

and joined a Junior Audubon Club. Like so many kids, he had a newspaper route as a source of small money. Unlike most, however, Roger planned his route so that he passed as many different habitats and feeders as possible when he got up at dawn to deliver *The Jamestown Morning Post*. He thriftily saved his pennies and dimes, and when he had enough, he bought a bird guide by Chester Reed, a four-power LeMaire opera glass from an advertisement in *Bird-Lore* (ancestor of *Audubon* magazine), and his first camera, a four-by-five plate model Eastman Primo Number 9.

In 1925, when Roger graduated from high school, family money was scarce. Just after his 17th birthday, he took a job at the Union-National Furniture Factory in Jamestown, under the supervision of Willem Dieperink von Langereis. Here he decorated Chinese-lacquer cabinets for \$8 per week. Langereis was a tough, demanding, and temperamental boss, but he recognized that young Peterson had talent. He encouraged Roger to become an artist and insisted that he go to New York City to attend art school. Roger was already husbanding his resources to attend his first AOU meeting to be held at the American Museum of Natural History in November 1925. At the end of that three-day meeting, Peterson was completely overwhelmed: he'd met many of his bigger-than-life heroes including Ludlow Griscom, who signed Roger's application for membership in the AOU, and Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Peterson's idol and the bird artist whom he then knew best. Fuertes was touched by the youth's enthusiasm and gave him a slim red sable paintbrush, "good for laying in washes." Here he also met Francis Lee Jaques, with whom he became very close friends, Frank M. Chapman, Arthur A. Allen, and Edward Howe Forbush, among others. This meeting set the pattern for his whole future. He went home, hoarded his meager salary, and dreamed about returning to New York to begin formal art training.

January 1927 saw the nineteen-year-old Peterson back in New York City enrolled at the Art Students League, studying under the distinguished teacher Kimon Nikolaides (author of *The Natural Way to Draw*), and leading realist painter John Sloan, of the Ashcan School. Using charcoal and later oil on canvas, he took classes in basic drawing and life drawing from models. His progress was rapid. To support himself and keep up art school payments, he returned to his old profession—decorating and refinishing furniture. He told me once that several of the more garish beds on whose headboards he painted pretentious roses were destined for some of the city's higher-class bordellos. After two years at the Art Students League, Roger competed for and won a place at the more traditional National Academy of Design, where he studied for the next three years under Raymond Neilson, Vincent DuMond, and Edmund Dickinson.

Most of his birding in those days was done

with members of the Bronx County Bird Club, a club that collected no dues and had no by-laws, constitution, newsletter, committees, or permanent meeting place. The club was started by a bunch of city dwellers in their teens who were mad for birding for the love of the chase. Roger and the other members, who included Joe Hickey, Irving Kassoy, and Allan Cruickshank, attended the bimonthly meetings of the Linnaean Society of New York at the American Museum of Natural History. This august organization, with older, more experienced professional and amateur ornithologists among its members, favorably influenced the club and guided the boys in becoming accomplished naturalists. In fact, the roots of Roger's later achievements go back to the club, where the tall, gawky youth played a heaven-sent game with a group of like-minded boys fired by their own enthusiasms.

With his formal art training over, Roger allowed himself to be lured into teaching natural history and art during the summers in Michigan and then at Camp Chewonki in Wiscasset, Maine. Finally, he took a fulltime teaching job at the prestigious Rivers School for boys near Boston, Massachusetts, where he taught many boys from families of consequence. One of his students destined for fame was Elliot Richardson, who later became Attorney General of the United States. Richardson, in 1974, nominated Peterson as the teacher who had influenced him most, and subsequently Peterson was named "Teacher of the Year" and received the Golden Key Award from the American Association of School Administrators.

Once upon a time, bird identification was based solely on the plumage and measurements of a bird in hand. Then along came those who became skilled at noticing distinctive aspects of stance, behavior, and flight action, which, together with plumage characteristics, were diagnostic of a species. It was now the early 1930s, and after he finished a full day of teaching at the Rivers School, Roger retired to his cubby-hole-sized room, where he labored at his first field guide. Other field guides were available, such as Frank M. Chapman's *Color Key to North American Birds*, Ralph Hoffman's prophetic but greatly overlooked guide published in 1904 and its companion guide to the birds of the Pacific Coast published later, and Chester Reed's tiny illustrated guides. How-

ever, Peterson saw his guide as "... a boiling down of things so that any bird would be readily and surely told from all others at a glance or from a distance." Night after night, for three years, he worked out his dissatisfaction with other guides by creating one of his own. Pains-takingly he sketched birds' distinctive patterns; carefully he distilled the text so that the most prominent field marks enabling identification were described to his liking. The first of his guides, published in 1934, had no purpose other than facilitating identification—a marvelous feat of sustained application. But the Great Depression was getting worse, and the book called for rather expensive art work. Four or five publishers turned it down. Finally, Houghton Mifflin was enthusiastic but still felt the book would lose too much money. Richard Pough, whose own guide later became a competitor of Peterson's, felt so confident that Peterson's book would be a success that he guaranteed to personally make up any money that Houghton Mifflin might lose. Roger himself agreed to forgo royalties on the first 1,000 copies, and then seriously wondered if any more than that would sell. Well, Roger didn't have to waste time worrying about his uncollected royalties. The entire print run of 2,000 copies of *A Field Guide to the Birds* (giving field marks of all species found in eastern North America) sold out in a few weeks, and the book had to be reprinted immediately. Since then, there have been four considerably updated revisions, 47 reprintings, and more than seven million copies of Peterson's two field guides (Eastern and Western) sold. The magnitude of this achievement is difficult to appreciate because many of us grew up with one or another "Peterson" in hand.

In that windfall year, 1934, Roger joined the staff of the National Association of Audubon Societies as Educational Director and Art Director for *Bird-Lore*. He became Secretary of the National Audubon Society in the 1960s, and he continued to serve as its special consultant up to his death. In 1971, Roger received the Conservation Medal of the National Audubon Society, an honor of which he was extremely proud.

For the next quarter-century Roger tackled his work as a craftsman, feeling strongly that art was something that should be enjoyed by everyone. Like so many young and unknown

artists, he had a financial struggle when he turned professional. During these years he re-illustrated and redesigned the same Audubon Junior Leaflets that had so inspired him as a boy. Somehow, the productively energetic Peterson, during the busiest years of his professional life, found time to carry out a truly prodigious amount of writing, resulting in a mass of semipopular books. His *Junior Book of Birds* was published in 1938. He completely revised the requirements for the Boy Scouts' Bird Study Merit Badge and prepared the official booklet about the badge. He wrote articles for *Life* magazine, using his own paintings and photography to present a wide gamut of bird studies for a national audience. *A Field Guide to Western Birds* was published in 1941. His ornithological writing was aimed largely at a popular market, bridging the gap between professional and amateur. The *Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds* was written with John Baker in 1941. During World War II, he was drafted into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where his field guide principles were used when he produced a "plane spotting manual" for the U.S. Army Air Corps. He thought that plane identification couldn't be all that difficult once he'd taken on the identification of birds of both the eastern and western United States. In the late 1940s, the Peterson Identification System was extended to cover other nature subjects. Houghton Mifflin continues to publish the series, which today numbers more than 50 titles. Until his death, Roger remained the editor.

Roger joined the AOU in 1929, became an Elective Member in 1935, and a Fellow in 1948. In 1944, at age 36, he received the William Brewster Memorial Award, the AOU's highest honor. He served as Vice President of the AOU in 1962 and regularly attended its annual meetings.

His first marriage, to Mildred Washington in late 1936, lasted less than seven years. After their divorce in 1943, he married Barbara Coulter, who shared his interests, was his unfailing companion and support, and mother of their two sons, Tory Coulter born in 1947, and Lee Allen in 1950. Barbara was the ever-capable, behind-the-scenes agent for their 33-year enterprise. Their marriage ended in divorce in March 1976. The following month, Roger married Virginia Marie Quinlan Westervelt, a woman of charm and character with similar in-

terests to Roger's. In the last 20 years of Roger's life, her presence was felt wherever he went.

Between 1938 and 1948, Peterson published 12 features on birds (with topics such as migration, warblers, marsh birds, birds of prey, etc.) for *Life* magazine, all illustrated with his paintings. In 1948, he wrote *Birds Over America*, illustrated with his own photographs. He received the John Burroughs Medal in 1950, his first literary award for nature writing. In 1952, he received the first of 23 honorary Doctor of Science degrees. He met Britain's best-known ornithologist, James Fisher, in 1950. The friendship blossomed, and in 1953 the two embarked on a 100-day, 30,000-mile odyssey. They traveled the length and breadth of North America, starting in Newfoundland and ending in Alaska by way of Mexico. Houghton Mifflin in 1955 published the story of their madcap transcontinental tour: *Wild America*. The film "Wild America," with essentially the same theme, was shown in Russia in 1957, the first film on American wildlife to be shown there. Roger and Fisher coauthored *The World of Birds* in 1964. In 1954, Roger authored and illustrated *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* with his European friends, Guy Mountfort and Phil Hollom. It has sold upwards of a million copies in 13 different languages. That year Roger received his first major international award: the Geoffrey St. Hilaire Gold Medal from the French Natural History Society.

In 1954, Roger and Barbara bought a densely wooded, 70-acre estate in Old Lyme, Connecticut, convenient to both New York City and Boston, where the offices of Roger's primary publisher, Houghton Mifflin, are located. Here the Petersons raised their sons and here Roger lived the rest of his life. As his life progressed, many of the leading ornithologists in the United States and in other countries were his personal friends, and visitors from all parts of the world were sure of a welcome. Roger was extremely hospitable and enjoyed nothing more than having friends in to talk about birds, old times, or about his other great love, conservation.

During the early 1960s, Roger began actively campaigning against environmental degradation, and he became the world's finest advocate for birds. He testified against DDT at the U.S. Senate hearings in the mid-1960s. In the 1970s, he threw himself into a campaign aimed at out-

lawing the spraying of DDT throughout Connecticut, in order to bring back the Osprey. He was a remarkable man, driven by an indefatigable energy and a self-imposed need to live up to what he thought was expected of him.

From the 1960s to the end of his life, Roger traveled the world over, painting, photographing, lecturing, and receiving the honors, distinctions, and tributes that were awarded him. He had his priorities right. The more he traveled, the more he realized that he had to spread the gospel of bird protection. During the last three decades of his life, Peterson did more than any other single person to propel birds into the American consciousness. Through him, people came to learn not just which bird was which, but how all birds fitted into the scheme of nature and, in turn, how crucial each part of the scheme was to the whole. When he lectured, it was often in aid of a favorite bird conservation project, and he was a great fund raiser. After some of his especially animated talks, vast benefits in public interest and awareness followed.

Roger was the preeminent birder of his time. Roger and birds had served each other very usefully indeed. He clearly realized this and began participating in international bird protection conferences from Tokyo to Kenya, using his influence to gain a foothold in various conservation debates. He received the Gold Medal of the New York Zoological Society in 1961, and in 1968 he was instrumental in the creation of a national park at Lake Nakuru in Kenya. He was heavily involved in the founding of the World Wildlife Fund in 1962, and he served as the United States Chairman of the International Council for Bird Preservation.

Roger rose to be an international figure as an author, painter, teacher, and conservationist. He believed that the appreciation of nature precedes its conservation, because people are not motivated to conserve what means nothing to them. He learned how to marshal his tremendous vitality into a one-man conservation dynamo, galvanizing others to act on behalf of birds.

Roger enjoyed an enormous following worldwide. Throughout his career, he gave himself wholeheartedly to his work and attained success by sheer hard work and initiative without any formal scientific training. Throughout his last decade, Roger moved

steadily between his drawing board, painting and revising his field guides, and the world of travel, fame, and influence. He was still brisk of mind and sharp of tongue, and he never seemed happier than when photographing in the field. At his death, Roger had upwards of 150,000 slides of birds, including more than 10,000 of the world's penguin species, all taken by himself, filed in his Old Lyme office. Bird conservation has lost one of its major protagonists while his life's work takes its place in history.

Through the width and fecundity of his creative output as a leading bird artist, Roger's name was known to millions throughout the world. He made a vast number of friends, introduced many people of all ages to birding, and worked to keep the interest of many of today's field people from flagging. One of his greatest qualities was his ability to inspire others. As a companion in the field he was unsurpassable. His quick sense of humor was a great asset in times of stress. He was never short of a birdwatching tale or two, and it was always fun listening to yarns about his numerous adventures. He has been a great friend to many birders who have him to thank for early encouragement and continued guidance. Roger was always the first to congratulate someone on a piece of good birding, such as a difficult or quick identification.

It was a cause of great satisfaction to his friends and admirers that he received public recognition during his lifetime. Among his innumerable medals and awards is the Arthur A. Allen Award from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in 1967. In 1972, he became the first American to receive the Gold Medal of the World Wildlife Fund from Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands. In 1974, he received the Explorers Medal from the Explorers Club. In 1978,

he was knighted and received the Order of the Golden Ark in The Netherlands, and he was designated Master Wildlife Artist by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Museum of Art. In 1986, he received the Eugene Eisenmann Medal from the Linnaean Society of New York. And in 1980, he received from President Jimmy Carter the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor awarded to an American civilian. With his untiring zeal, conservation could have had few ambassadors better able than Roger to reach and affect an audience. He was a world-famous example of not just what-to-do, but that it can be done.

Roger was very independent, sometimes aggressive, and not one to suffer fools gladly, but he also was kindly and humorous. He was quiet and excellent company. He enjoyed the companionship of those he respected and trusted, and his friendships were durable and varied. His company was avidly sought by birders who appreciated that Roger was himself a rarity. He was warm, forthright, even blunt in opinion, with an impish sense of fun that he retained into old age.

An artist is fortunate—and so also is the world—in that he leaves behind tangible mementos of his talents for future generations to enjoy. What regrettably cannot be preserved is the warm and fruitful relationship so many people enjoyed with this gifted and friendly man. So has ended a most remarkable life, full of high adventure in many spheres, and of very considerable achievement. Those of us privileged to have known and worked with and learned from Roger Tory Peterson have gained immeasurably from his friendship and the enthusiasm he conveyed in all that he did and said and wrote. We are left with happy memories of a man of great humanity, intelligence, energy, and fun.