

ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

(Editor's Note: The coming of the millenium has inspired a cornucopia of "best of" lists, particularly for books. The Modern Library was the trend-setter with its "Hundred Best Novels of the Twentieth Century." Others have followed; a recent issue of Birding featured a comprehensive look at "Bird Books of the Golden Age."

Bird Observer plans nothing so ambitious. Nonetheless, because books are such an important source of information and pleasure, we thought that a different type of "looking back" might be enjoyed by our readers. We have invited several of our regular book reviewers to recall some of the bird books that have been important to them — books they learned from, books that were associated with particular aspects of their birding lives, or books they found to be just plain good reading.

The first of this series is a reminiscence of the childhood books that inspired Mark Lynch to his lifelong devotion to birds, birding, and bird conservation.)

— Alden Clayton

THE BOOKS THAT MADE ME A BIRDER

By Mark Lynch

When I was a child, my life was filled with books. I could read at a very young age and often spent hours simply sitting on our front porch in Watertown reading and enjoying illustrations in the numerous natural history books that our family owned. Exactly where these many books came from I cannot be sure, but many were huge, hardbound tomes from early in the century that I have never seen anywhere else. The line drawings and old photography contained in these books set off many dreams in me of exploring and seeing these creatures in real life. It also helped that my two older brothers were confirmed natural-history addicts, so our house was always filled with large numbers of reptiles, amphibians, fish, and the occasional invertebrate. A good number of these books were about birds, and looking back on my life, I realize what a major impact they had on the development of my present-day interest in natural history and ornithology. Amazingly, I still have all those books, and that surely attests to their great personal significance. The following is a partial list.

BIRD GUIDE: LAND BIRDS EAST OF THE ROCKIES, by Chester Reed, Doubleday & Page, 1926. These small guides always seemed to be around the house. Although they neatly fit into your pocket, I honestly cannot say that I ever took them into the field. The illustrations, apparently based on old hand-colored photographs of stuffed specimens, were really not that good when compared with other books available in the 1950s. Still, I learned the basic

species in my neck of the woods, and I really loved the chatty text. These books allowed me to learn the basics at such an early age that when my mother brought me (as a pre-schooler) along to PTA Night for my older brother's class, I identified out loud all the pictures of birds that were hanging around the classroom — Baltimore Oriole, Indigo Bunting, and Scarlet Tanager — much to the teacher's amazement. Mothers live for moments like that.

GAMEBIRDS, WILD FOWL AND SHOREBIRDS (1916) and *USEFUL BIRDS AND THEIR PROTECTION* (1907), both by Edward H. Forbush and published by the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture. It may seem a bit surprising that a mere tyke like I was in the mid-fifties would find these two big, rather technical old tomes (one dark forest green, the other maroon) interesting. I would sit on my porch engrossed in reading the old records of shorebirds and even memorizing the names of all the ducks. I loved holding these old volumes and poring over the information and records because they seemed to convey some of the history and tradition of natural history and ornithology. These books undoubtedly contributed both to my love of waterfowl as an adult and my passion (some would say obsession) for keeping records. The small black-and-white drawings were also appealing to a child. In the *Useful Birds* volume, there is an illustration of a row of Cedar Waxwings "passing the cherry," and to this day I eagerly await seeing this behavior in real life.

AN INTRODUCTION TO BIRDS, by John Kieran. I don't know the publisher, because those pages and the spine are gone on my copy. This large-format book was a favorite of mine. The color illustrations were particularly entrancing to my child's eyes, and today I can clearly see evidence of my having traced certain pictures. I hate to confess this, but my copy also has several holes in the pages where particular illustrations were cut out and kept in several of my natural-history scrapbooks. The idea of cutting up books like this of course gives me the chills today, but as a young child I was intent on keeping all the pictures that I found really fascinating in one convenient volume, thus eliminating the need to riffle through so many heavy books. The end papers of my copy contain the even more personal contribution of some early and very bizarre cartoons I drew in pencil of Woody Woodpecker! The text even today is a joy to read, describing a Ruby-throated Hummingbird as "about as big as a minute."

NATURE'S WAYS: HOW NATURE TAKES CARE OF ITS OWN, by Roy Chapman Andrews, Crown Publishers, 1951. Any child who had even a passing interest in dinosaurs in the 1950s knew the name of Roy Chapman Andrews. He was the man who was on the expedition to the Flaming Cliffs of Mongolia when the first dinosaur eggs were found. He wrote several important children's books on dinosaurs, as well as general natural-history books like this one. Each page featured a different topic, usually accompanied by a black-and-white photograph of a sumptuous color illustration by Andre Durenceau. There was something about these paintings and their almost Regionalist style that really drew me in as

a child. As an adult I can still conjure up many of these painted images in my mind at will. I can remember my excitement at seeing my first Manchinee Tree as an adult, the result of the effect that Durenceau's illustration of the blinded woodchopper had on me as a child. That chapter was titled "The tree that blinds." Andrews titled each page with a similar conundrum of a description. Examples included "A bird that never sees what it eats" (American Woodcock), or "His front door is a waterfall!" (Water Ouzel, now known as American Dipper). This book also introduced me to the first extinct creature that wasn't a prehistoric reptile or mammal, "The bird that didn't know what to do" (the Dodo). The idea that humans could cause the extinction of a creature was new to me. A few years later when I received *The Great Auk*, by Alan W. Eckert, for a present, my concern for endangered species became a lifelong mission.

BIRDS: A GUIDE TO THE MOST FAMILIAR AMERICAN BIRDS, by Herbert S. Zim, Simon & Schuster, 1949. These books are marvels of economy, yet still attractively and accurately illustrated and crammed with good information. They were also inexpensive and therefore available to a very wide audience. This was my first field guide, and I used it at a very young age to ID Green Heron, Slate-colored Junco, and Black-and-white Warbler. In addition to the volume on birds, I also owned and used the books on mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and fishes. These are the books that really inspired me to go outside and look for these creatures. Though Peterson is given tremendous credit for establishing the field guide form, not nearly enough attention has been given to the importance Herbert Zim and the Golden Guides children's series had for creating the adults that would eventually use the Peterson Field Guides. I still collect these books and still love reading them.

Mark Lynch is a teacher and bird monitor at Massachusetts Audubon's Broad Meadow Brook Sanctuary as well as a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum. He also hosts INQUIRY on WICN radio, a talk show of the arts and sciences.

