

# ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

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(Bird Observer continues its series celebrating the books that have inspired, delighted, or enlightened our book reviewers.)

## Books That Influenced My Life

*William E. Davis, Jr.*

When I was a small boy my father would read to me in the evenings — natural history and adventure books — titles such as Jim Corbett's *Man-eaters of Kumaon* (1946, Oxford, UK), Patterson's *The Man-eaters of Tsavo* (1927, MacMillan, New York), Theodore Roosevelt's *African Game Trails* (1909, Sundial, New York), all of Carl Akeley's marvelous African adventure stories, and the euphonious words of William Beebe all drift up from my long-term memory. My father had been interested in natural history, and particularly in birds, from an early age — he got his first bird book in 1907 at age six, Chester Reed's little oblong *Bird Guide: Land Birds East of the Rockies* (1906, Doubleday, New York) and thus natural history and birds became a part of my awareness as I began to think about the world.


From the sixth grade through high school I attended Belmont Hill School, and one of the requirements of that attendance was to read at least four books every summer (yes, we were tested on them each fall). All the books that I read concerned natural history with an emphasis on birds. By far the most influential with me were the long series of books by William Beebe, the research director of the New York Zoological Society. Beebe's first book, *Two Bird Lovers in Mexico* (1905, Houghton, Mifflin, Boston) was autobiographical (as were virtually all his books) and related his adventures riding horseback and camping through the wilds of Mexico with his young bride. Another book, *Pheasants Jungles* (1927, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York) told of his 17 months in the far East during which he collected natural history data in the Himalayas and the jungles of the Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia for his two-volume monograph *Pheasants: Their Lives and Homes* (1931, Doubleday, New York). A series of books (e.g., *Edge of the Jungle* (1921, Henry Holt, New York), and *High Jungle* (1949, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York), often compendia of essays previously published in the magazines *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*) dealt with his various expeditions into the rain forests of British Guiana and Venezuela. The focus of the books ran the gamut from botany to microbes and mammals, but all contained chapters on birds. I have since spent many happy months in Central and South America birding and doing research on birds. For the past eight years I have traveled to the rain forests of Amazonian Peru to give workshops on birds, sponsored by Children's Environment Trust, for American junior-high school students. I trace my keen interest in tropical American birds directly to the many wonderful hours of vicarious adventure in the jungles of William Beebe's books. I decided early on that I would be a naturalist of some sort, and this resolve was strongly influenced by William Beebe.

My first actual adventure with tropical American birds was a 1961 trip to Trinidad and Tobago with my father on a birding trip led by C. Russell Mason who had been Executive Director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society during the 1940s and 50s, and whom I knew from the many Sunday birding bus trips that were run by Mass Audubon. The highlight of that trip of many highlights was an afternoon spent at Simla, William Beebe's tropical research station in the Arima Valley of Trinidad, where Beebe spent the last years of his life. We were greeted by an active little old man dressed in khaki who I at first took to be the caretaker. I soon realized that the "caretaker" was William Beebe, my boyhood hero and the man who had been so influential in shaping the future directions of my life. We spent a marvelous afternoon at Simla listening to Beebe, in a fervent gush of retrospection, relate adventure after adventure from his long life of expeditions to remote and fascinating places — I watched my first White Hawk soar overhead as Beebe talked about Trinidad and its birds. Years later I wrote about William Beebe and that afternoon ("Simla," *Naturalist Magazine*, 1985, 6(3):11) of many recollections.

One book stands out above all others in significance in its influence on fostering my obsession with birds. That book was Roger Tory Peterson's *Birds Over America*, first published by Dodd, Mead & Company in 1948. It remains as refreshing and compelling to me today as it did on my first reading about a half a century ago. The book consists of a compendium of short chapters many of which relate Peterson's personal experiences with bird watching, and the pantheon of interesting people that he met along the way. Some of the chapters relate birding experiences in Massachusetts, and the people he describes were people that I knew, or at least knew of. Ludlow Griscom, the legendary master of instant field identification of birds, was the focus of several chapters and as a small boy my father and I had encountered Griscom on several occasions when we crossed paths with Griscom and his entourage. I remember particularly Griscom coming to a gathering of Cape Campout participants and handing around a large alcid, sans head, for identification, and another instance when he identified, with a great theatrical performance, an immature Common Murre before an audience of eager birders at Cape Ann on one of the Massachusetts Audubon bus trips. I could relate to the awe with which Peterson portrayed Griscom, and I was very excited reading Peterson's well-written tales. They elicited from me the thrill-of-the-chase response that made birding in those days a thrilling event for me, and really hooked me on birds and birding. I also hold that book responsible for my decision, many years later, to embark on a long and rewarding project — writing a biography of Ludlow Griscom (*Dean of the Birdwatchers: A Biography of Ludlow Griscom*, 1994, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.). Compiling the information for the biography gave me an opportunity to meet and get to know some remarkable people in the world of birds, including Roger Tory Peterson. *Birds Over America* was reprinted a few years ago, and I would still recommend it as a must read for anyone already interested in birds, or as a gift to prompt an interest in birds.

The last of my "influential bird books" is not one that is easy reading, or one that I might recommend to everyone. Erwin Stresemann's *Ornithology from Aristotle to the Present* was written in the late 1940s in a shattered and battered post-WW II Germany. An English translation, edited by William Cottrell, was published by Harvard University Press in 1975. The translated version included a 32-page epilogue with an additional 10

pages of references — *Materials for a History of American Ornithology* — written by Ernst Mayr, who had been mentored by Stresemann, and is perhaps the most influential evolutionary biologist of the twentieth century, and a prominent philosopher and historian of science. I have always been interested in history and reading this rather academic historical account of birds and ornithology stimulated an apparently latent interest. The epilogue by Mayr certainly made it clear to me that the history of North American ornithology was a wide-open field. I credit this book for stimulating me to undertake the writing of *History of the Nuttall Ornithological Club 1873-1986* (1987, NOC, Memoir 11), for the Griscom biography, and for coediting the Memoir series for the NOC, and the series *Contributions to the History of North American Ornithology* (Davis and Jackson 1995, NOC, Memoir 12, and Davis and Jackson, in press, NOC, Memoir 13).

I am by training a paleontologist, but soon after finishing graduate school I decided to forsake long-dead animals and turn my professional research attention to the birds that had become my hobby and my passion. The books that I have discussed had an enormous effect on the direction of my personal and professional life. In this era of television and the internet, I can only hope that people do not neglect the importance and potential impact of a good book. 

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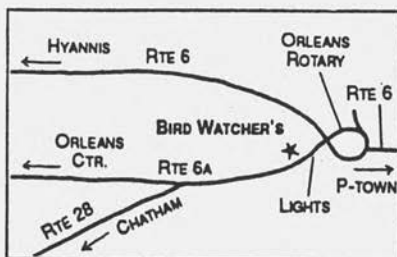
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