

ABOUT BOOKS:

(Editor's note: This is the last of the Looking Back series that has been a feature of Bird Observer for the past year. With its publication, Alden Clayton is retiring as Book Review Editor. His successor as editor will be Mark Lynch. Mark has been a frequent contributor to Bird Observer and we welcome him to the staff.)

Looking Back

Wayne R. Petersen

When first invited to write about "books that have inspired, delighted, or enlightened" me, I reckoned that the task would be straightforward and the choices instantaneous. How wrong I was! As I began to recall the myriad titles that have given me pleasure and enlightened me through the years, my list seemed to grow endlessly. As a natural history bibliophile with a passion, practically since toddler days, for all things alive the assignment suddenly seemed daunting.

Thinking about the request in earnest, I found myself transported in thought back almost half a century to a time when, as a child of five, I was confined to bed with an acute childhood illness. One day a family friend named Polly came to visit. During that visit, Polly gave me two sets of National Audubon Society flash cards of birds — fifty cards per box — one featuring summer birds and one depicting winter birds. To this day my family tells me that this was the beginning!

Those National Audubon flash cards, eventually four seasonal sets in all, were my first introduction to birds. I was fascinated by the paintings, most done by the preeminent Canadian bird painter, Major Allan Brooks. The paintings gave me the visual stimulus that birds provide even today, but they also offered insight into the habits, behavior, nest type, and diet of each species pictured on the cards. Within a very short time I learned the name of every species depicted on the flash cards.

In grades four through six, my interest in natural history blossomed. First I was captivated by insects, then reptiles and amphibians, fish, mammals, flowers, and always by birds. A trip to a local bookshop introduced me to the Golden Nature Guide Series (Simon and Schuster, New York). I soon began acquiring the entire series: *Birds, Reptiles and Amphibians, Mammals, Flowers, Trees*, etc. Not only did I read these modest volumes, I also memorized the position of the organisms illustrated on each page. I actually have recollections of first encountering new bird species and announcing out loud what position it was in on a particular page! These Golden Nature Guides, along with the National Audubon Society flash cards, were probably for me the most influential publications in my earliest formative years.

As I grew older, I only wanted bird books and other natural history titles for birthdays, Christmas, and any other occasion that was appropriate for gift giving. My first major ornithological acquisition — as defined in my youth by weight and number of pages — was T. Gilbert Pearson's *Birds of America* (1936, Garden City Pub. Co.,


Garden City, New York). Lavishly illustrated with color paintings by none other than the great Louis Agassiz Fuertes and studded with black-and-white photos by Arthur A. Allen, W. L. Finley, and H. T. Bohlman, this tome soon became my bible as my thirst for bird knowledge increased. Eventually, I could almost imagine myself looking at the birds in the habitats that were so skillfully captured by Fuertes' brush. With the aid of this fine old reference book, facts about the lives of birds, the places they lived, and how they behaved were becoming galvanized in my mind. At this point, I knew that someday I wanted to see all those birds in real life.

As time went on, I eventually made friends with the legendary Ruth P. Emery, the original Voice of Audubon and bird statistician for the Massachusetts Audubon Society's publication, *Records of New England Birds* (1945-1968). Ruth became my mentor in a variety of ways, but particularly when it came to buying bird books. She always seemed to know just what bird book I needed for whatever it was I wanted to know at the time. Through nearly forty years of enduring friendship, Ruth Emery undoubtedly cost my family and me many thousands of dollars in natural history titles! Among the first titles that Ruth encouraged me to obtain were *A Guide to Bird Watching* by Joseph Hickey (1943, Oxford University Press, New York) and *A Guide to Bird Finding East of the Mississippi* by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. (1951, Oxford University Press, New York). The volume by Hickey helped bring structure and order to my growing passion for birds and birding. Hickey's emphasis on the value of note taking and what to put in a field notebook served me well, even to this day. Likewise, his chapters on "Adventures in Bird Counting" and "Explorations in Bird Distribution" are as valuable today as they were the day they were written. *A Guide to Bird Watching*, along with Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1947, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston), probably received as much use as any title in my library during my high school birding days.

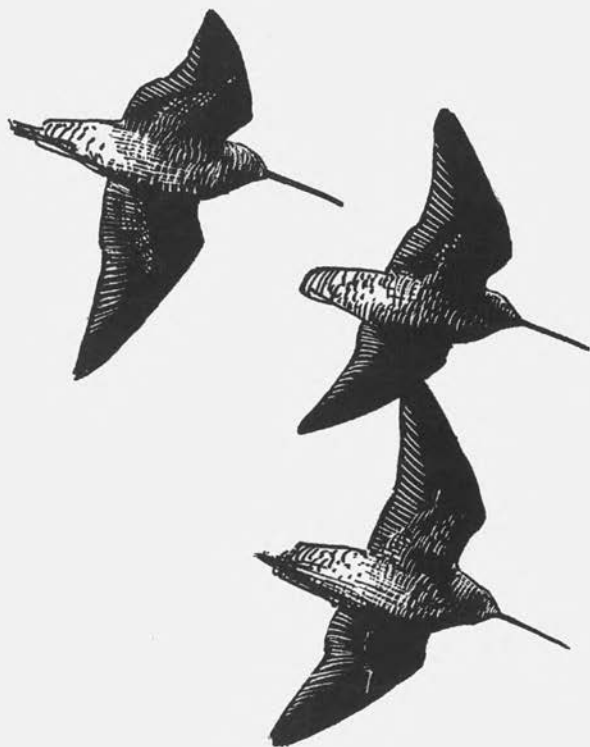
Pettingill's bird-finding guide became of increasing importance after I began to drive, as well as on family camping trips. I discovered that one could go birding beyond the range of a day's bicycle ride and that there was actually a book that would tell you where to go birding when you got there! In addition, I found that a dedicated birder could learn much about other geographical areas simply by reading the introductory sections for each state in Pettingill's compendium. Only in retrospect could I appreciate what a pioneer Sewall Pettingill was for the likes of Jim Lane, Peter Alden, and all of today's modern bird-finding guide authors.

Needless to say, as I got older my favorite bird book list continued to grow; however, I will refrain from taking the reader much further in this reminiscence. There are, nonetheless, three additional titles that influenced my early thinking about birds and birding to the extent that they warrant mention. The first is Edwin Way Teale's *North With the Spring* (1951, Dodd, Mead and Co., New York). This classic seasonal travel account by one of North America's great naturalists was such an inspiration to Connecticut naturalist Noble Proctor and me that we undertook a two-month journey of our own that took us from New England to Key West during the spring of 1966. From a different perspective, *A Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States* by Thomas S. Roberts (1955, University

of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis) provided detailed descriptions of plumage and molt sequence that brought new meaning to the seasonal changes I had observed in the field. Indeed, Roberts fostered an understanding that was to last me a lifetime.

The final title that was to profoundly influence my later thinking about birds, especially birds in Massachusetts, was *Birds of Concord* by Ludlow Griscom (1949, Harvard University Press, Cambridge). In this classic regional study, Griscom described Massachusetts bird life in ways akin to how my earlier readings in Hickey had encouraged me to think about birds in general — in ecological terms, with an emphasis on population ecology and population trends. After reading *Birds of Concord*, I never looked at birds in the same way again. For me, *Birds of Concord* was a watershed volume. Although it would be possible to go on and on, this sampler highlights at least some of the titles that were especially important to me as a young man with a passion for birds. 

Wayne R. Petersen is a member of the *Bird Observer* editorial board, Vice President of the American Birding Association, and staff ornithologist at the Massachusetts Audubon Society.



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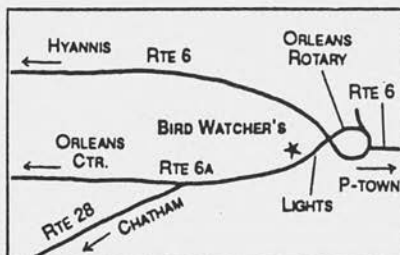
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