Florida Field Naturalist 38(2):73-75, 2010.

REVIEW

Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson by Elizabeth J. Rosenthal. 2008. The Lyons Press. Guilford, Connecticut. 436 pp. ISBN-10: 1599212943. $29.95 hardcover, $14.95 paperback.

Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography by Douglas Carlson. 2007. University of Texas Press. Austin, Texas. 296 pp. ISBN-10: 029271680X. $24.95 hardcover.

"Dammit!—I don't like Massachusetts at all—I find that I cannot draw books out of the Boston Public Library because I live in Brookline—I cannot get a collecting permit because bird painting falls under the heading of 'personal gain'—Hell! A person can't do a goddam thing around here—Can't get along with any of the local babes because they're all 'debs' & their mamas don't favor school teachers. . . . Just now, my sex-life is the thing I'm worried about."

So wrote a frustrated young buck named Roger Tory Peterson, not long after his 23rd birthday, to fellow Bronx Bird Club member Joe Hickey. It's a highlight of Elizabeth J. Rosenthal's biography of birding's founding father. Published in the centenary of his birth, *Birdwatcher* is the product of over one hundred interviews and an impressive amount of research in the archives of the National Audubon Society, the Roger Tory Peterson Institute, and other public and private collections, and it mostly does what Rosenthal intends, which is to show us Peterson's centrality not merely to birding but to the international conservation movement as well.

This is perhaps a necessary thing, because Peterson diminished with age. Many of us remember only his last decades, when his white-haired visage grimaced at us from countless magazine ads, when it seemed as though no popular bird book issued from the presses without a foreword or introduction by him, and when nearly every *Birdwatcher's Digest* essay that he churned out (often retreads of older pieces, Rosenthal says) ended with a resolution that, any day now, he was going to take up his brush and resume the "more painterly" style he'd abandoned for field guide illustration. Which he never got around to doing.

Now he's a historical figure. *A Field Guide to the Birds* was published three quarters of a century ago; the European field guide he wrote with Guy Mountfort is fifty years old. Modern American birders carry Sibley or National Geographic into the field, not Peterson, and in Europe the Collins guide predominates, while Peterson and Mountfort's book, once "the absolute Bible," is dismissed as "inferior." *Birdwatcher* is a reminder that Peterson once held a singular position, and possessed an absolute authority that none of his successors can command.

Unfortunately its organization leaves a lot to be desired. A biography should read just as the life it describes was lived: start at the beginning and end at the end. Rosenthal, however, remarks that Peterson's life was "starlike, an explosion of experiences and work in countless directions" and that's how she writes it, sorting incidents from all periods of Peterson's life into thematically-related chapters. This approach has a number of failings. Stories are shoved in haphazardly. An exciting trip to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego is shoe-horned into "Adventuresome Flights of Conservation" even though conservation was not its focus; Rosenthal excuses this by writing that scholarly articles that eventually resulted (decades later, in some cases) from the trip "*may* have brought the birds and other animals a step closer to wise stewardship" [my emphasis]. The reader often gets the impression that Rosenthal collected hundreds of anecdotes and is determined to use every last one of them. Peterson's mother receives a letter from

a friend, describing Peterson's quick adjustment to New York, and this is quoted as evidence of "his ability to quickly assess his surroundings—something any naturalist must do even in urban areas." Awkward transitions abound. E.O. Wilson calls Peterson "a great scientist"; the next paragraph begins, "Was Roger a scientist—or a sorcerer?" and introduces an entirely unrelated story describing his preternatural field skills.

But Rosenthal was not the only one inspired by the Peterson centenary. In 2007 Douglas Carlson, a retired English teacher (and, like Peterson, a native of Jamestown, New York), published *Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography.* Carlson's is probably the superior work, more focused and better edited. Its chief failing, or chief merit, depending on what you expect from a biography, is that it gives us less of Peterson's personal life and more about his books, his art, and his photography. As a critic Carlson seems to know his stuff; his evaluations are knowledgeable, thoughtful, thorough, and sympathetic, and his obvious admiration is tempered by an awareness of Peterson's limitations. More to the point, he understands that Peterson's greatest achievement demands the lion's share of attention from his biographer.

That achievement—the watershed event of both Peterson's life and the history of birding—was the publication of *A Field Guide to the Birds* in 1934, when he was only 25 years old. Houghton-Mifflin so doubted the book's prospects that it printed a mere 2,000 copies and promised royalties only after the first 1,000 were sold. On the day of publication, Peterson was "absolutely flabbergasted . . . to walk through Harvard Square, and to see in the co-op there a whole window full of my field guides!" In three weeks all 2,000 had been purchased, and Peterson never looked back.

Rosenthal says little about the process of the *Field Guide*'s composition. She tells us that the idea of simplified illustrations came from Ernest Thompson Seton's *Two Little Savages*, which Peterson "devoured" as a youth. He made such sketches for his own use, and when William Vogt, a fellow nature enthusiast, saw them in 1930, he urged Peterson to create a field guide. In 1931 Clarence Allen offered Peterson a job teaching natural history at Rivers School, of which he was headmaster: "Roger could devote free time to his field guide. Allen's secretary at Rivers would be available to type the manuscript." The next thing we know, the book is being shopped around to one publishing house and another.

Carlson is more specific, tracing the book's development meticulously and noting the most pertinent elements in Peterson's training and background. He displays an actual page from *Two Little Savages* of "Far-sketches showing common Ducks as seen on the water at about 50 yards distance," and the resemblance to Peterson's illustrations is remarkable. He explains how Peterson's lack of financial support from his parents blocked any chance at the academic career he probably would have chosen and pushed him toward commercial art (so that "he approached things visually rather than phylogenetically. Grouping birds by their appearance rather than their taxonomic relationships emphasized visual differences among similar species and helped with field identification"). He considers the stylistic influences of Peterson's instructors at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design, as well as what he learned from his field experience with the Bronx County Bird Club and Ludlow Griscom. He describes the crucial role played by Peterson's instructional jobs at camps and schools from 1929 to 1934 in forming the idea of the *Field Guide*, which was conceived primarily as a teaching device. And he devotes three chapters to an analysis of the book itself and a description of its favorable reception by the public and the ornithological community ("nowhere will the novice find better training or less sparing discipline," wrote Frank Chapman).

The *Field Guide* and its successors—*Western Birds*, *Birds of Britain and Europe*, *Birds of Texas and Adjacent States*, *Wildflowers*, and *Mexican Birds*—were the source of Peterson's fame and fortune, and yet they haunted and frustrated him. For years at a time he had to put off doing what he most wanted to do, which was to paint artistically, so that he could work on the plates or text of some new guide or revise an old one (he revised the original *Field Guide* four times). On all of this, the products of Peterson's working life, Carlson is better than Rosenthal.

On Peterson's life in the wider sense, however, Rosenthal's book tells us more. She goes into more depth about the ventures that occupied Peterson when he wasn't painting or writing. For instance, only in passing does Carlson mention Peterson's close association with Lindblad Wildlife Tours; Rosenthal gives it a whole chapter. She writes more than Carlson about Peterson's friendships with James Fisher and Peter Scott, and includes interviews with birders and conservationists who were close to Peterson or just had an interesting story to tell about him.

One of the main themes of her book is Peterson's deep involvement with wildlife conservation, which occupied his entire adult life. He published a plea to end the shooting of hawks in 1930, he wrote about the dangers of oil slicks as early as 1942, and he worked as a staffer with the National Audubon Society from 1935 until he was drafted in 1943. There's a section nearly a hundred pages long called "Conservation Stories." One protegee declares that "Roger should be remembered as the 'father of the environmental movement,'" and Rosenthal makes a fairly good case for this.

Rosenthal also gives us much more about his personality and his home life. She clearly regards Peterson with something more than admiration, but unlike Carlson she does not shrink from describing his less heroic traits. For instance she suggests that, as a young instructor at the Audubon Nature Camp in Maine, he pursued women almost as assiduously as birds. He wangled permission to take "some campers" out after dark looking for owls, but this was revoked when someone discovered that "Peterson always limited those expeditions to a party of himself and the comeliest lass in the camp." In fact, a mere six months after he started working there, he wed one of those comely lasses, Mildred Washington. She was the first of Peterson's three wives, and their union was the briefest, lasting six years.

He married his second wife, Barbara Coulter—the only one of the three still surviving and thus the only one interviewed by his biographers—shortly after his divorce from Mildred became final, and remained with her for 33 years. They had two sons, Tory and Lee, but Peterson was not a family man. "He was not one to submit to the needs of others, even of loved ones," writes Rosenthal. A friend stated simply that, as far as domestic life went, "he was not there." And Barbara said, "Roger had nothing to do with his children."

He and Barbara divorced in 1976, and later that year he married Virginia Marie Westervelt, for whom no one has anything good to say (William Zinsser called her "very bossy, a very peremptory woman," and a family friend said she was "a bunch of fluff, and unsubstantive"). Carlson reports that Peterson left all his paintings, photographs, and papers to the Roger Tory Peterson Institute in Jamestown, but that after his death Virginia secretly altered the agreement so that her own children inherited "the most commercially and educationally valuable items," leaving the Institute only the "dregs."

It's a mistake, though, to equate the personal with the "real." Peterson made everything else in his life secondary to his work. He was "pure energy," recalled Robert Michael Pyle. "He worked as hard as any human I've ever seen," said a literary agent. His son Lee wrote, "He was never content. He always needed to do more." A man who worked that hard does not want to be judged on what kind of husband or father he was. He judged himself on his accomplishments and expected us to do the same. Obsessed with his place in history, he would ask what history will say about him. Carlson tries to answer that question, while Rosenthal, in depicting "an explosion of experiences and work in countless directions," gives a more rounded, but ultimately more superficial, view of his life. Both books are worthwhile, but because of its deeper engagement with Peterson's work Carlson's is more highly recommended.

Rex Rowan
2041 NE 15th Terrace
Gainesville, Florida, 32609