

*The Auk* 109(3):646–647, 1992

## IN MEMORIAM: L. RICHARD MEWALDT, 1917–1990

C. JOHN RALPH

*U.S. Forest Service, Redwood Sciences Laboratory, Arcata, California 95521, USA*



L. RICHARD MEWALDT, 1917–1990

(Photographed on Point Reyes National Seashore holding a White-crowned Sparrow in March 1967)

Leonard Richard Mewaldt lived a full life, and his manner of living and passing were an inspiration to many. He is best known as a researcher who used capture of birds as a primary tool to define life-history traits of the species he studied. His major accomplishments were in elucidating life histories of nutcrackers and of sparrows of the genus *Zonotrichia*. In later years he became well known through his association with bird observatories and research stations.

Dick, as he was known to all, was born 31 May 1917 in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. He grew up in Aberdeen, South Dakota, where his father, Professor N. H. Mewaldt at Northern State College, was a mathematician, physical scientist, and amateur paleontologist who loved the outdoors. One of the neighbors there, F. W. George, began banding birds in retirement and took Dick on as a lively, interested 14-year-old apprentice. For several years they banded 2,000–5,000 birds per year. At 19, Dick got his own master permit.

He attended Northern State College and then the University of Iowa for his Bachelor's degree in 1940. He enlisted in the Army in 1942, was in the Military Police during World War II, and mustered out at the rank of Captain in 1946. Meanwhile, in 1941 he married Frances Lee Booth; they had two sons, William and John. Fran was a major part of the rest of his life, and a great source of strength and inspiration for him. After the army, he pursued graduate work on the Clark's Nutcracker. First he earned a Master's at the University of Montana in 1948 under Philip Wright, and then a Doctorate at Washington State University in 1952 under Donald Farner. Farner interested him in *Zonotrichia*, which consumed a large portion of his professional interests for the rest of his life. Dick was greatly interested in the cycles of reproduction, molt, and migration of several species, but especially the White-crowned Sparrow. Throughout his career, Dick's research

interests paralleled those of the late James R. King; the two collaborated extensively.

In 1953 he secured an Instructor's position at San Jose State University, rising through the ranks to Professor of Zoology. He sponsored a series of graduate students, most of whose studies resulted in theses in which Dick played an active and helpful role. Among these students were Myron C. Baker, Robert E. Gill, Martin L. Morton, Michael Rigney, and me. Much of the work of the graduate students involved the use of birds in the field and in his laboratory at San Jose State. Here he had a complex specialized for research on the physiology of reproduction, molt, and migration of sparrows. The banding station in his backyard—landscaped by Dick and Fran to attract birds—was a prominent feature in many of his papers and those of his students.

Dick's high standards as a professor and supervisor, along with my lack of ability as a cage cleaner, led somewhat indirectly to the founding of Point Reyes Bird Observatory. In the Spring of 1965, Dick gently (as was usually his style) terminated my year-long job as a cage cleaner in his laboratory and suggested I look for something else to occupy my time until my teaching position started in the fall. Soon I was a seasonal ranger at Point Reyes National Seashore. There, I put the Superintendent in a receptive frame of mind for a bird research station on the Seashore and, with Dick's energy and stature and the help of many others, we brought it into being. Not satisfied with just founding the Observatory, he played a pivotal role for many years as President of its Board, as the Principal Investigator of research at the Observatory sponsored by the National Science Foundation, and as the person providing continuity and a clear vision of the role of the Observatory in ornithology. Throughout his involvement with bird research stations, Dick continually passed along his enthusiasm for the insights that could be gained from the capture and processing of large numbers of free-living birds. He very clearly showed how many aspects of a bird's physiology and life history can be directly inferred through close scrutiny of each individual captured. He influenced, directly and

indirectly, many hundreds of people in this productive technique.

In the 1980s Dick helped found the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Later, he started the Coyote Creek Riparian Station near San Jose, where he worked as a volunteer Director and, as the station matured, as a volunteer and its guiding light, virtually until his death.

He suffered in his last year from a rapidly progressing lung dysfunction, possibly brought on by the years of close contact with birds. He accepted this with, what was to us at times, maddening grace. In the fall of 1990, several dozen of his friends, colleagues, and students gathered in San Jose to pay tribute to him. Despite being confined to a wheelchair and tied to an oxygen tank, Dick rose to the occasion and matched story for story with us all. It was with a great sense of gladness that we all left that party, privileged to have been associated with a man with fine style. Only 10 days later, on 19 August, he passed away.

During his lifetime Dick gave freely of himself to many professional organizations. He served as Secretary, and was later elected as a Fellow of the AOU. He was President of the Cooper Ornithological Society and elected to its Honorary Membership. He also was a Fellow of the California Academy of Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and served on the Boards of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology and the Western Bird Banding Association. The latter always was important to him, and he served as its President.

Throughout his involvement with organizations and students, Dick provided the best kind of leadership: that which sets high standards for hard work, dedication, integrity, and humaneness. He was forthright without being blunt. Even though Dick had strong, well-stated opinions, he, above all, had an open mind to the opinions of others. Many times I saw him change his mind markedly when presented with a new array of facts. In many ways his life inspired and set an example for all of us in whose lives and careers he played a part. We are poorer for his passing and richer for his living.