

William Vogt: a man ahead of his time

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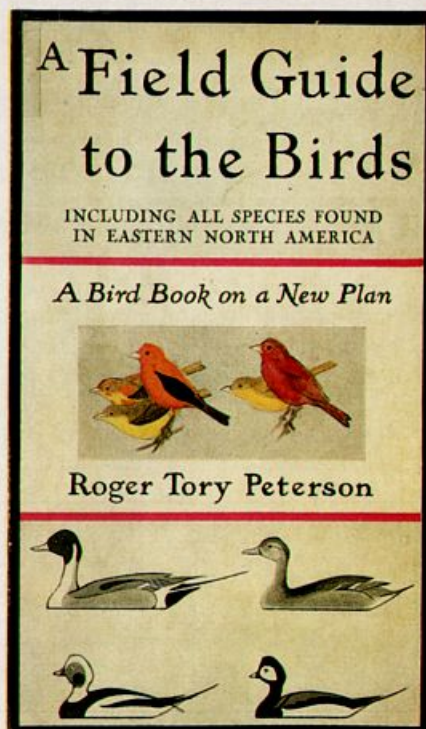
HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR WILLIAM VOGT my first field guide might not have seen the light of day. He was, indeed, the "midwife."

I met Bill in the late 1920s, just before one of the meetings of the Linnaean Society of New York at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). I was in the downstairs washroom trying to scrub oil paint from my fingernails so as to make myself more presentable. Bill asked what I did to get so much paint on my fingers. I told him I was a student at the Art Students League on 57th Street and that I also painted Chinese lacquer cabinets in a loft on 134th Street.

As for Bill, I learned that he was a drama critic who wrote a nature column for five Westchester County newspapers. His wife, Juana, had been an actress.

In those days the Linnaean Society was dominated by Ludlow Griscom, a curator in the Bird Department. Because of his work among the specimen trays Ludlow had masses of minutiae at his instant recall. Thus, whenever he raised his binocular to look at a bird in the field, all of the minor details would fall into place and he could name the bird instantly, to the astonishment of his fellow curators who still relied on the shotgun as the final terminator.

Ludlow, the guru of the field-glass fraternity, was always a good show at the bi-monthly meetings of the Linnaean Society, but was a bit austere in keeping a group of young upstarts in line, a half-dozen eager beavers known as the Bronx County Bird Club (BCBC). Such future stars as Joseph Hickey and Allan Cruickshank were charter members. Coming from Jamestown, New York, I became the first non-Bronx member of this select little group. Griscom was our God and his *Birds of the New York City Region* our bible which every one of us could quote chapter and verse. We learned all about field marks from the master and we in turn became the avant-garde of the birding elite, refining field



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techniques and setting new standards. It was logical that we should choose Griscom as our role model because he represented the new field ornithology. He bridged the gap between the specimen tray ornithologist and the modern birder.

Bill Vogt, just a few years older than the lads of the BCBC, was sort of a fringe member, welcome to join us in the field if he wished. Bill and I became good friends, and inasmuch as he was a better botanist than I, he taught me the flowers while I showed him the birds.

Bill was badly crippled with polio which he contracted in a summer camp when he was a teenager. He survived, but came so close to the edge

that his own mother, scanning the hospital bulletin in the morning, read that her son had succumbed during the night.

Because of his infirmity, Bill would sometimes stumble and fall but would refuse a helping hand. It was on one of these Sunday trips, a Christmas Bird Count on the Hudson River, near Ossining, that he suggested that I write the *Field Guide*. As he wrote in the New York Times:

"The river was Whistlerian gray - and the outlines of the east and west banks gave us something of the sensation of hanging in space. The few hundred Canvasbacks off the end of Croton Point, their reflections in the calm river, were part of the sense of the void. . . A barely perceptible note fell from a flock of small birds overhead, and my companion said with unchallengeable assurance, 'siskins!'"

Bill obviously was impressed by my snap judgment, even though I explained that siskins are relatively easy - "They always sound like siskins."

"Roger," he said, "you know these things - the field marks and the voices. Why don't you pass on your knowledge in a book?"

He was more excited about the idea than I. As we walked back to the car along the edge of the marsh we developed a plan. The illustrations would be simple and patternistic, rather like those sketches of ducks that Seton had drawn in *Two Little Savages*. The book would concentrate on field marks rather than full descriptions. Voice descriptions would be included if they would help. "But," I asked, "how would I get a publisher if I did write it? Nobody knows me."

Vogt promised that he would find a publisher.

It was because of Ludlow and the BCBC that I was able to prepare my field guide. I learned from them to ignore irrelevant details and to focus on the key field marks. Being academically trained as an artist, I was able to put it all down and give it form.

Griscom left the AMNH for a position on the staff of the Museum of

Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Massachusetts and it was not until I went to Boston in 1931 to teach school that our paths crossed again. It was there that we renewed our friendship, but I hesitated to tell him about the field guide I was working on. He was in the hallowed halls of academia, I was just a teacher who wished to help neophytes.

I missed the BCBC, but enjoyed the company of the young men of the Harvard Bird Club as well as the more staid members of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, the oldest bird club in the country. Our weekend excursions to Newburyport and the outer Cape bolstered my knowledge of the fine points of field identification.

True to his word, Bill Vogt peddled the field guide, still in unfinished form, to four publishers; two in New York, two in Boston. Remember, the year was 1933, the bottom of the Great Depression, when 18-million people were out of work and many more were hungry. Publishers were wary about risking capital on an unknown author. Naive about the facts of publishing, I did not realize that an unsolicited manuscript had less than one chance in a thousand of acceptance.

At length, after three publishers had turned the book down I accompanied John B. May, state ornithologist of Massachusetts, to the office of Francis Allen, a senior editor at Houghton Mifflin in Boston. When I opened my portfolio this dignified gentleman, a good birder, showed immediate interest. The drawings were admittedly crude, but the concept was valid. To test it, Allen called in Ludlow Griscom, sat him at the end of the long conference table while the plates were held up. Ludlow identified each bird immediately without benefit of binocular.

Earlier, while he had been sounding out reluctant publishers, Bill introduced me to the editor of *Field and Stream* who accepted three articles about duck identification entitled "*Half-a-Mile Away*." For these I received \$155. Years later Prince Hugo of Lichtenstein told me that he clipped the illustrations out and put them up in his bathroom - "Aquatic, you know."

While having lunch in a speakeasy on 45th Street, Bill convinced Dick

Westwood, editor of *Nature Magazine*, to run a similar article on gulls. Those four articles preceded the *Field Guide* (published in 1934) by two or three years. Thus the "Peterson System" was born. History has shown the field guides to be the longest-lived and most popular books Houghton Mifflin has ever published.

It was because of the then recently published *Field Guide* and my experience as a teacher, that John Baker, who had just taken the reins at the National Audubon Society, asked me to join the staff as educational director.

Meanwhile Bill Vogt had made a name for himself as the curator of Jones Beach Sanctuary on Long Island where he often entertained the Bronx gang when we came to look for goodies like Black Rails on Guggenheim Pond. Because of a growing friendship with Ernst Mayr, Bill's own interest in birds had gone deeper than mere listing. He was into behavior, specifically with Willets and yellowthroats.

At Jones Beach he played a sly trick on a yellowthroat. He put a mounted female in the territory of an ardently singing male. The male yellowthroat has a "Lone Ranger" mask through his eyes; the female lacks this; she is just a plain little yellow and olive-brown bird. This male yellowthroat, overlooking the obvious fact that the female was not only inanimate but badly stuffed at that, courted and copulated as if she were the most desirable creature on earth. Two or three times he came back to repeat the performance. While he was away, Vogt pasted a black mask on the female's face. The male returned and was about to carry on as before when he suddenly noticed the mask. He bounced a full two feet in the air and dashed away as if completely mortified. Vogt concluded that unlike grouse, which use the trial and error technique, yellowthroats can recognize the other sex visually.

Within months of my own entrée into Audubon, Bill Vogt was recruited as editor of *Bird-Lore*, later to be renamed *Audubon Magazine*. The magazine, newly acquired from Frank Chapman of the American Museum, had a victorian look, rather like a religious journal, so Bill asked me as art director to design a new cover. I drew a soaring Rough-legged Hawk as

seen from above. It brought praise from the venerable A.C. Bent of *Life Histories* fame, but I am afraid my second cover, of shoveller ducks, was a disaster.

Bill Vogt, as editor of *Audubon Magazine*, gave new life to the Society, but eventually a rift developed between him and John Baker - a "palace revolt," if you will. I never quite understood the politics of it, but the board backed John Baker. Vogt was fired along with several other staff members. I was spared because as Baker put it, I was "too young and naive to know better."

Because Bill was again on his own, Robert Cushman Murphy, chairman of the Audubon Board and one of Bill's supporters, arranged with the Peruvian Guano Administration for him to spend three years in Peru, mostly on the offshore Chinchas, studying the cormorants, boobies and pelicans. Some years later when I spent several days alone on these guano-covered islands, I marveled how Bill with his bad leg and hip could have managed it. To land on the hazardous cliffside I had to be lifted from the heaving boat by crane, and one misstep or fumble on the slippery rocks could have resulted in a bad fall.

When his avian studies were concluded, Bill not only knew a lot about the dynamics of seabird populations, but had also gained insights into some of the basic environmental problems of human survival in Latin America. It was logical that he was then tapped on the shoulder to be Conservation Chairman of the Pan-American Union with headquarters at their offices in Washington.

It was while in the nation's capital that he wrote his *Road to Survival* which sounded the warning of overpopulation. Boosted by the pre-publication of three chapters in the *New Yorker*, the book became an instant best seller, much in the manner of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* some years later.

The next logical step for Bill was to take the helm of Planned Parenthood. Today, nearly all of the major environmental organizations, including National Audubon, recognize that the number one threat to the world's ultimate survival is overpopulation. William Vogt, who started with the birds, was a man ahead of his time. ■