

ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

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

BOOKS THAT MADE ME A BIRDER

by John Kricher

As Claude Rains said at a climactic moment (and much to the relief of Humphrey Bogart) in a most memorable film: "Round up the usual suspects." Yes, my first bird book, as for many of us, was the *Golden Nature Guide to Birds*, a present from my Grandmother Min. I first perused that book when I was about seven or eight, in the early 1950s. Min and I marveled at how odd the American Bittern appeared, hunched over, so strangely compact looking. Were there such things? Must be so, because other birds pictured in the little book, the Bluebird, the Robin, and the Red-winged Blackbird, were regular visitors to our suburban backyard. So too were the Mourning Dove, the Crow, and the Grackle. In the summer, little yellow birds were common, "wild canaries," which, according to the Guide, were properly called Goldfinches. In winter, little gray and white birds appeared, which we called "snowbirds," but which the Guide called "Slate-colored Juncos." I learned the names. And one extremely memorable day (because I still remember it with utter clarity), an amazing-looking feathered creature was hitching up one of our slender backyard trees: a Red-headed Woodpecker. Yes, I guess there are such things. I was hooked.

Years later, as I reached my teens, I discovered the reprinted Reed Guide and, soon thereafter, the stunning *Field Guide to the Birds*, written and illustrated by some guy who used three names: Roger Tory Peterson. I still have the worn, now disarticulated copies of each of these three guides — my treasures, my past, my life. But there were other books, many others. And two of the best were by the guy who used three names.

Birds Over America, which I bought in a little bookstore in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, was a real bonus. Peterson had signed it. The clerk was impressed, and I was thrilled, neither of us realizing until I was at the cash register that the book was graced with the author's own signature. And what a book. To me, RTP was, and still is by far, the best at capturing the magic that is birding. Reading Peterson is almost like having him there, he's so good. Those first chapters captivated me, and I still go back and reread them: "Birds and I," "The Lure of the List," "The Big Day," "Census at Christmas," "Deceiving the Experts." From the opening line — "So you've been out after birds again!" — these chapters collectively captured the psychology and sociology of birding. To this day, they make me feel "warm and fuzzy" about how I have chosen to spend

the greater part of my life. Later chapters were as informative as they were entertaining, discussing such topics as how many North American birds there might be, which are the most abundant, and how birds migrate. There were profiles of people who had devoted their lives to studying such species as Bald Eagle and Barn Owl, and a riveting account of Peterson's successful search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker on the old Singer Tract. Two vivid chapters were "West of the 110th Meridian" and "Rain Shadows of the Mexican Border," both of which made me yearn to travel, to go west, go south, go any place where there were birds to see, so many birds to see. Peterson described pelagic trips, warbler waves, bird colonies, everything. He talked about the coast of Maine — so I convinced my parents to take me to the coast of Maine. He wrote of sand and tide and the many birds to be found along the seashore — and, again, my parents obliged.

But for the pure excitement of travel, the book that I most recall is *Wild America*, coauthored by Roger Tory Peterson and British ornithologist James Fisher. This marvelous book, taken largely from Peterson's and Fisher's journals, chronicled their 30,000 mile automobile journey around North America in 1953. To me, their accounts of birding the Appalachians, the deep South, the Everglades, the Dry Tortugas, South Texas and Mexico, the Southwestern Deserts, California and the Pacific Northwest, and, finally, Alaska and the Pribilofs were spectacular. Peterson and Fisher set the bar high in that volume, and those of us who became their disciples knew what we had to do, a commitment we made with the utmost enthusiasm. Birding was extended for us, beyond the backyard list, beyond the state list, to a real life list, whose assembly would take countless miles and provide a lifetime of pleasure. How many of us can look back with satisfaction to having devoted decades to our own versions of "Wild America"? For this we can thank Roger and James.

Both of the books described above had strong ecological overtones. It became readily apparent to me that there was much more to birding than naming birds. Peterson, who showed how to skillfully name birds, had a far broader message. Birds are only one form that life takes; there are numerous others, and they, too, are satisfying to learn. Peterson spoke of butterflies and plants, of whole ecosystems. And I soon began to find pleasure in looking beyond birds and reading accounts that included a broader treatment of nature.

So many books I could name, but one does surface above most others. My high school library contained a volume written by a newspaper columnist named John Kieran, a book titled *Footnotes on Nature*. Published in 1947, the book is an account of Kieran's field experiences, all in the New York area, with friends named only as "the Medical Student," "the Astronomer," and "the Artist." Kieran does a lot of birding in this book but also discusses other things, wildflowers among them. And he has fun doing it. This was a book to which I could easily relate, as it in so many ways mirrored what my own life was

becoming. Kieran exudes the pleasures of being in the field, where opportunities abound for fun and for learning. For example, he relates a trip to a reservoir where he sought a rare duck, the European Teal (then still considered a species separate from Green-winged Teal). He found it, and in the process met a famous author of natural history works, Edwin Way Teale. And, says Kieran, there were Green-winged and Blue-winged teals as well, a "four teal(e) afternoon."

What I have related here is but the proverbial tip of the iceberg — I have many books — but it will have to do. In looking back, I can say with great fondness that many of the pleasures I have experienced in a lifetime with birds have been on the printed page as well as in the field.

Golden Nature Guide to Birds, by Herbert S. Zim and Ira Gabrielson. New York, NY. Simon and Schuster. 1949. *Birds Over America*, by Roger Tory Peterson. New York, NY. Dodd, Mead & Company. 1947. *Wild America*, by Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher. Boston, MA. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1955. *Footnotes on Nature* by John Kieran. Garden City, NY. Doubleday & Company. 1947.

John Kricher is a professor at Wheaton College and has written prolifically on birds, biology, and ecology. He is perhaps best known for *A Neotropical Companion: An Introduction to the Animals, Plants, and Ecosystems of the New World Tropics*. John is a long-time friend (and former editorial board member) of *Bird Observer* and currently serves on the board of directors of the American Birding Association.

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