

James Lee Peters and the *Check-list of Birds of the World*

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James Lee Peters was born in Boston on August 13, 1889, during the period when Richard Bowdler Sharpe was directing the compilation of *Catalogue of the Birds of the British Museum* (27 volumes, 1874-1898), and about a decade before Sharpe began publishing his *Hand-list of the Genera and Species of Birds* (5 volumes, 1899-1909) (Bock 1990). Peters' great professional accomplishment was to initiate the series *Check-list of Birds of the World* that was to culminate in 1986, 34 years after Peters' death, replacing Sharpe's *Hand-list*, and providing the most comprehensive taxonomic treatment of any class of organisms.

Peters' father, Austin Peters, was a veterinary surgeon, and young "Jimmy" was provided with a first-class education at Miss Segar's Private School, followed by Roxbury Latin. He enrolled at Harvard University in 1908 and graduated with an A.B. in 1912 (Wetmore 1957). He did not continue on to an advanced degree in zoology, a decision that undoubtedly constrained his professional ambitions and directions. At a young age he developed a fascination with birds and natural history, a predilection that was apparently supported and encouraged by his parents. In 1904, through his father's influence, he was invited to accompany Arthur Cleveland Bent and several other notable ornithologists on an excursion to the Magdalene Islands, where he reportedly showed signs of taxonomic prodigy by arranging the corpses of birds killed in collisions with the lighthouse by genus and species (Wetmore 1957). He was further influenced by other local ornithologists (the greater Boston area has historically been a vat of ornithological fermentation), including C. J. Maynard, whose bird walks Peters joined. At Harvard he came under the influence of Outram Bangs at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), the man who provided Peters with training and mentorship, and whom he would replace as Curator of Birds at Bangs' death in 1932.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, field guides for the identification of birds were somewhere between nonexistent and embryonic (Peterson's famous guide was two decades away), and binoculars little thought of and seldom used. Ornithology was still most definitely of the shotgun school — if you wanted to identify a bird you shot it and keyed it out from one of the standard texts (Barrow 1998). Preparation and collection of stuffed study-skin birds, as well as of nests and eggs, was a widespread hobby among sportsmen and ornithologists. In this collecting-mode context, it is not surprising that young Peters, following graduation from Harvard, embarked on a series of collecting trips that took him to Mexico (1912); the southern United States as a temporary employee of the Biological Survey, forerunner of the Fish and Wildlife Service; and to the Dominican Republic for the MCZ (1916).

After a hiatus of several years, during which he served in World War I in Europe, Peters collected for the MCZ in Argentina, under the sponsorship of John C. Phillips.

There he met Alexander Wetmore of the Smithsonian Institution, perhaps the most prominent North American ornithologist of the first half of the twentieth century, who was to become a close friend and colleague for the remainder of his life. He affectionately called Wetmore "Doc" and was in turn given the nickname "Patagonia Pete" by Wetmore. The extent of their correspondence is attested to by the 67 letters from Wetmore to Peters from May 4, 1920 to December 9, 1923 that are in the special collections at the Mayr Library at the MCZ. Most concern getting together for collecting forays, new birds they had collected, and nomenclatural problems. A typical warm invitation by Wetmore to Peters to do some collecting together concludes a May 4, 1920, letter: "My dear James: ... My address will be c/o American Consul, Buenos Aires. Drop me a line when you have time. Can't we arrange to see each other somewhere for a week or two? It would look pretty good to see your phiz say on Christmas Day 1920. I don't believe that we would quarrel over a few specimens. Drop me a note when you reach B.A. [Buenos Aires] (after you have had your first drink) Sincerely, Doc." After their adventures together, Peters returned to Cambridge and became an Associate (unpaid — apparently earning a living wasn't something he needed to worry about at this time) and continued his informal apprenticeship with Outram Bangs. Peters had been working up and publishing the results of his collecting trips since 1912, and he continued to do so, publishing some of the results of the Argentine expedition jointly with Wetmore. He eventually published more than 100 scientific papers, mostly taxonomic in nature, clearing up nomenclature problems and describing new species and subspecies of birds. By 1928 he was apparently on the MCZ payroll and was appointed Assistant Curator of Ornithology. By then he had completed several more collecting trips to the Caribbean and Honduras. After that, he became engrossed in working with the collections rather than personally adding to them (Barrow 1995).



Peters had been elected a Resident Member of the Cambridge-based Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC) in 1908, while a freshman at Harvard, and he thus came under the influence of William Brewster and other local notables. He served on the Club's Council continuously from 1922 until the end of his life, first as the Club's Secretary for a decade, then as Councilor until 1939 when he became Vice President, and then President from 1942 until his death. He was rather old school in his attitude toward accepting sight records of birds — he wanted the bird in hand as verification. When he joined the NOC it was most definitely a Victorian men's club, and after his death the Club went through a

wrenching upheaval, with Ludlow Griscom succeeding him as president after a hotly contested election. Griscom had become the champion of field birding and sight identification of birds, and he sent the Club into a tizzy by suggesting that it might be desirable for the Club to admit a female to resident membership (Davis 1987). Peters never liked Griscom, who was from a personality standpoint his virtual antithesis, which made for difficult relations at the MCZ, since Griscom worked there as Research Curator of Zoology from 1927 through the early 1950s (Davis 1994). Griscom was a great showman and tended to dominate gatherings such as the annual meetings of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, which tended to be gala affairs, while Peters would remain quiet and inconspicuous in the background. Hence Peters presided over difficult periods in NOC history, weathering the winds of change, and the restrictive and difficult years of World War II.

Peters was also influential in the then regional North-eastern Bird-Banding Society (now Association of Field Ornithologists). He served as a Vice President from 1938 until his death, and as editor of their journal *Bird-Banding* from 1939 to 1950 (Davis 2000). Although a museum man with a predilection for, and history of, collecting birds, he was genuinely interested in live birds and even enjoyed bird watching on a casual basis (he referred to bird listing as "ornithological golf"). While at Harvard, he corresponded with William Brewster, and his letters provide some insight into his level of care in the observation of live birds: December 12, 1910, "My dear Mr. Brewster: As I understand that you have never seen the Evening Grosbeak and thinking that you might have time to look for the bird I am happy to say that yesterday I saw, while with two other observers, three females of this species in the willows opposite the museum in the Arnold Arboretum. The birds were quite tame and allowed us to observe them for several minutes in good light and at close range. They had three distinct notes; the first like the call of the English Sparrow, but with something of the quality of a Flicker; the second, given in a subdued voice, like the chatter of White-winged Crossbills, and the third, also subdued, resembling the note of the Great-crested Flycatcher." He kept sight records as well: April 9, 1913, "After I arrived home today I looked up my notes covering the Fox Sparrow this spring and found that I have seen just eighteen individuals of this species since March 20 as follows. March 20, 1, Harvard [;] March 23, 2, Grafton [etc.]." Clearly, Peters was more than just interested in shooting birds.


He became an important contributor to the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), the premier professional ornithological organization of North America. He was elected to Associate membership in 1908 and became a Fellow in 1928, after which he served as Councilor from 1929 until becoming Vice President in 1938, and continued in that capacity until his election as President in 1942. Since AOU presidents become permanent council members, he continued on council after his three years as president until his death.

Peters was heavily involved in the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, serving eventually as president of that august body. His ornithologically conservative, cautious, precise, and meticulous nature apparently made him ideally suited for the vicissitudes of nomenclatural priority and dispute.

Undoubtedly, the greatest of Peters' professional accomplishments was the monumental (14 volumes) *Check-list of Birds of the World*. The *Check-list* had a rather inauspicious beginning as a card catalogue of the birds of the MCZ collection. The card catalogue was probably the brain child of the new Director of the Harvard Museums, Thomas Barbour (Bock 1990). Barbour had previously prepared a card catalogue of Cuban birds in the MCZ, and may have extended this idea to the birds of the world (Barbour 1923). Barbour, a compulsive collector of things zoological, had taken over as Director in 1927, and as a zoologist with strong interests in natural history, promoted major changes in the MCZ after his arrival. Peters had become an Associate of the MCZ in 1921, and became a full-time volunteer in 1923. His first task was to make a card catalogue of the MCZ bird holdings, a job about which he was anything but enthusiastic. Peters had been primarily a field collector of birds up to that point — which he very much enjoyed — and was not pleased to become slave to a museum card catalogue. In a February 1923 letter to Alexander Wetmore (quoted in Bock 1990), Peters wrote: "Possibly my days in the field are over, a most dismal prospect to contemplate." In fact, they were, for all intents and purposes, over, as the card catalogue became the inspiration and basis for the *Check-list* which consumed a large share of his remaining professional life. The *Check-list* was to replace the very outdated Sharpe's *Hand-list*. Sharpe never embraced the subspecies concept — hence there was no complete catalogue of the world's birds at the subspecies level; Peters was to change this. The *Check-list* was apparently Peters' brainchild, and he kept it very much his own. He didn't enlist the help of another resident ornithologist at the MCZ, James Greenway, or seek assistance outside of the MCZ from the ornithological community. He was primarily interested in taxonomy at the species level, and for his *Check-list* adopted Alexander Wetmore's order- and family-level taxonomy without substantial change (Bock 1990).

Peters probably became a paid member of the MCZ staff in 1925 or 1926, was appointed Assistant Curator of Ornithology in 1928, began work on the *Check-list* in late 1928 or early 1929, and became Curator in 1932 (Bock 1990), by which time Volume I of the *Check-list* had appeared. Subsequent volumes appeared at about three-year intervals. In 1940, after four volumes had appeared, he was awarded the Brewster Medal by the AOU, the highest award given by that organization. Volume VII was the last published in Peters' lifetime. Peters curiously had made no provision for a successor to complete this monumental task, and only in 1950 had asked another ornithologist, John Zimmer, to actively assist him by writing up the difficult Tyrannidae and related families (Bock 1990). Hence when Peters died in 1952, the task of finishing the project fell to James Greenway, who succeeded Peters as Curator. The following year Ernst Mayr came to Harvard and became the dominant force in bringing the *Check-list* to completion. Peters' great dream did not reach fulfillment until the final volume (XV) appeared in 1986, and the index, compiled by Raymond A. Paynter, Jr., in 1987. Begun in 1928 or early 1929, the project had taken nearly 60 years, and serves as a monument to one of Massachusetts' most respected ornithologists.

In his professional life Peters was a quiet and reserved person, but many who knew him remarked about his fine sense of humor. At home on his farm in Harvard, Massachusetts, he raised apples, was a long-time member of the local volunteer fire department, and participated as a member of the local theatrical group in about twenty plays.

Many of Peters' systematic papers will eventually fade in significance, but his *Check-list* will remain a standard reference into the indefinite future. James Lee Peters' professional life was fittingly summarized by Ernst Mayr (1953): "There is hardly another ornithologist left who has as balanced a knowledge of birds, both of the Old and the New World, as Peters had. His death leaves a gap which cannot be filled." 

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