

## A SPECIAL PERSON

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

Every youth has some one very special person who, at some point in his or her life, represents a pinnacle of excellence or prestige. For many, these figures must forever remain as poster pictures on a bedroom wall, as an autograph on a wrinkled baseball program, or as a distant glimpse in a large auditorium. Some youths, however, are fortunate enough to make personal contact with their esteemed elders, with these contacts often resulting in a lifetime of friendship and productive experience. Such has been my association with Ruth Emery.

On a crisp autumn day in 1956, a budding ornithologist (7th grade vintage, I believe) noticed a strange woodpecker hammering upon an old, diseased elm tree in his hometown of Wellesley. Running home with excitement, Gilbert Pearson's Birds of America promptly showed the bird in question to be the rare and locally unusual "Arctic" Three-toed Woodpecker (now known as the Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker). As a new member of the Massachusetts Audubon Society at the time, logic dictated a call to report such a rarity to Ruth Emery, field note editor for the Massachusetts Audubon Magazine. With heart in throat, the call to the Boston Audubon House was made. After politely listening to the description of my prize, Ruth allowed that it sounded likely and then put me in touch with several local experts who were to be notified for final verification. A brief conversation followed and my personal acquaintance with Ruth Emery was launched. Many similar phone calls followed, more often with questions than with rare bird reports, and the relationship grew.

Two years later I saw Ruth in person for the first time. She was smartly dressed in field clothes in the lobby of Chatham's Wayside Inn. I was a participant in the annual Audubon Cape Cod Campout; Ruth was a leader. After introducing myself, I enjoyed the ego-lifting experience of talking birds with Ruth for a full 15 minutes, right in the very parlor of many other well-known birders of the day. What a thrill for a lad of fourteen!

As annual gift-giving occasions rolled around, my family came to know Ruth (for years only a voice on the telephone) as the person to consult about what new bird book to buy for their insatiable son. Today, Ruth knows my library nearly as well as I do, since she helped lay the still-existing corner stones. Along with birthdays came increased mobility and regular pilgrimages to Audubon House. These visits often ended with several hours of Ruth's valuable time being spent chatting with a young man who absorbed every word as gospel. Many valuable lessons came from those discussions (I especially recall a fine exposition on Snowy Owl migration) and I remember being particularly impressed by her systematic approach to bird record-keeping. She immortalized the concept for me to this day.

As the years passed, our friendship strengthened. From casual encounters in the field to planned excursions together, I became increasingly aware of Ruth's tremendous enthusiasm not only for birds, but for people as well. Her myriad bird Christmas cards filling her house at holiday

time or the number of inquiries from out-of-state visiting birders stand as ample testimony to her generosity and interest in other people, many of whom Ruth admits hardly knowing herself.

Initially our friendship was always tied to the commonality of our interest in birds. This often involved late hours in Ruth's study working on field records for either the Records of New England Birds or American Birds, or else long talks reminiscing about Ruth's experiences with Ludlow Griscom. In time, however, the friendship evolved into more than one between mere birding colleagues. Ruth was an honored guest at my wedding, a welcome visitor at my Thanksgiving table and I enjoyed the privilege of being the youngest invited guest at her Audubon retirement party.

Her spirit through the years brings to mind numerous amusing situations or similarly memorable events. The flat tire in West Newbury during a searing heat wave, a piggy-back ride across a corn field in 3 feet of snow, a midnight cocktail in Ruth's kitchen following a late Nuttall Club meeting, and most recently, an eightieth birthday celebration in which Ruth was surrounded by friends transcending several generations of the birding fraternity.

While these reflections of a special person could be mirrored a hundred different ways by a hundred different people, they represent some of the things that Ruth Emery has meant to me in the nearly 25 years of our continuous acquaintance. May Ruth Emery's influence continue to hold a special place for yet another generation of wide-eyed fledgling birders.



Ruth and friends on Monomoy in November.  
(Ludlow Griscom is holding the scope.)