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IN MEMORIAM: RICHARD A. “DICK” PARKS

Robert A. Sargent
1263 Clairmont Place
Macon, GA 31204
kywarbler@cox.net

Dick (we never called him Richard) Parks, the last surviving charter member of the GOS, passed away in Atlanta on 14 December 2013, the day before his 93rd birthday. For nearly 75 years his name was synonymous with life-like bird illustrations, putting him on par with other renowned craftsmen in this small club, including Fuertes and Sutton. Like checklists, field guides, and binoculars, Dick was a fixture within the GOS almost from the beginning. He attended a meeting of the Atlanta Bird Club (ABC) - the precursor to the Atlanta Audubon Society - on a December night in 1936 when the guest speaker was a young Roger Tory Peterson. The next day, 16 December, ABC founded the GOS at a meeting attended by 22 bird enthusiasts at a restaurant. The germination of the seed that became the GOS started in the early 1930s, when ABC members who were also members of the American Ornithologists' Union began to clamor for the establishment of a statewide bird club steeped in science. Dick was not able to attend the GOS' founding meeting. Although he was a charter member, he did not attend his first society meeting until the spring of 1946, when the members gathered in Augusta. It was at that meeting that Dick first displayed his art, much of which had been painted during his service in the navy from 1943-1945. Thereafter, he hardly missed a meeting until his memory began to fail him. The last meeting he attended was the society's 75th anniversary celebration on Tybee Island in January 2011.

Dick found his ruling passion as a teenager, and he never let it go. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that it never let Dick go. His love of art and drawing was apparent early in his childhood. His passion for birds bloomed in his teens, during the years before field guides, quality optics, bird clubs, and great birders were prevalent. He once said that his interest in birds started with

the observation of Blue Jays in an oak tree at his Atlanta home when he was 14. Dick confirmed the identity of those birds with the aid of line drawings found in his Boy Scout Handbook, which piqued his interest in bird study. His first mentor was Ethel Purcell Harris, and this fortuitous pairing could not have been more beneficial for Dick, or for ornithology in Georgia. Harris, you see, was a biology teacher and organizer of a Junior Audubon Club at his high school. She was also an officer in ABC and could rightly be called the GOS' founding mother, because she organized the "famous" 1936 meeting.

Dick's fascination with birds and his painting skills took flight during his college years. He graduated with a degree in architecture from Georgia Tech University in February 1943 and promptly went on active duty in the U.S. Navy. The world may have been at war, but Dick was not going to put his ornithological passion on a shelf for the duration. Among the things he took onboard his first ship was a Peterson field guide, as well as his drawing and painting equipment. The ship's other crew members must have thought he was curious, but he soon made bird study converts out of some of them. Thirty miles off the coast of San Diego 2 Burrowing Owls were discovered onboard, and they were soon captured by shipmates and delivered to Dick so he could paint them. There would be many more opportunities for him to paint, study, and record notes on pelagic and island birds during his military service.

Following the war, Dick worked as an architect in Atlanta, where he and his wife raised 3 sons. He became deeply involved with the GOS during this period, working as co-editor and then editor of *The Oriole* from 1949-1955. There was little time available for him to paint birds and establish a reputation that might lead to a career in this, his obsession. And so he took whatever came his way, doing odd jobs on the side, which included paintings of mammals, flowers, and butterflies. He met Thomas Burleigh, the eventual author of *Georgia Birds*, in the 1940s and briefly entertained hopes that he might be hired to do the illustrations for that work. But the funding for the book's publication was being managed by Herbert Stoddard (first president of the GOS), who happened to be close friends with George Sutton, and so that opportunity did not come to pass.

Dick would have to wait until 1960 before his illustration skills would receive prominent recognition, oddly enough, via an art contest in Alabama. Unbeknownst to Dick, 3 of his color plates were entered in the contest and they were judged to be the best in the competition according to *National Geographic* artist Walter Weber. This competition changed Dick's life, because in the following decade he was contracted to produce nearly 350 illustrations for Thomas Imhof's seminal work *Alabama Birds*, he painted the warbler plates of

The Birds of Colorado by Alfred Bailey and Robert Niedrach, and he produced many of the color plates and drawings for Walter Rosene's *The Bobwhite Quail*. In the 1970s Dick was invited to meet then Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, and his painting of a Brown Thrasher and Cherokee Rose still hangs in the governor's mansion.

Newfound prominence in the world of art and book publishing never detracted Dick from his dedication to the GOS and to the study of birds. He served as Regional Vice President for the Atlanta area before the society codified its current executive committee structure, and he donated prints, designed brochures, logos (e.g., the Laughing Gull pair in flight that appeared on the society's stickers and stationery), and membership cards for the GOS and the Atlanta Audubon Society to use in fund raisers for more than 50 years. His illustrations have graced the covers of a litany of prominent publications about birds in Georgia including: *A Birder's Guide to Georgia* (editions 1-5); *Annotated Checklist of Georgia Birds* (editions 1-5); Robert Norris' *Distribution and Population in Summer Birds in Southwestern Georgia* (1951); Ivan Tomkins' *The Birdlife of the Savannah River Delta* (1958); and Robert Loftin's *An Index to Georgia Bird Records in American Birds (Volumes 25-37, 1971-1983) and Its Predecessor, Audubon Field Notes (Volumes 1-24, 1947-1970)* (1984). Like many other serious students of ornithology from his generation, he initially used a gun to collect bird specimens, producing numerous study skins. He soon discovered that there were many deceased fresh birds to be had (and drawn) around the foundations of communication towers following storms, so he put away his gun. Dick eventually donated the study skins in his collection to the Fernbank Science Center in Atlanta, which was only fitting, as he, Jim Mackey, Bill Griffin, and Joe Greenberg often birded Fernbank Forest in the late 1960s. This foursome was responsible for documenting some of the earliest observations of bird species recorded in that old growth forest.

In 1976, the GOS bestowed its highest honor – the Earle R. Greene Memorial Award – on Dick in recognition of his then 40 years of dedication to conserving Georgia's birds, and to his service to the society. When the GOS held its 50th anniversary meeting in Macon in 1986, Dick chaired the planning committee for the meeting and took charge of the task of writing a history of the society for the event. Fittingly, the featured speaker for that meeting was Roger Tory Peterson, by then a peer and friend whom Dick had first met the night before the GOS was founded. Twelve years later, in 1998, Dick's painting of an Orchard Oriole became the current cover art of the GOS journal, replacing the former cover which was painted by Peterson.

Although the society formally recognized Dick's lifetime contributions to the organization 38 years ago, in recent years the GOS has looked for additional opportunities to further honor his exemplary service. In 2006, the society established the Richard A. Parks Young Birders Camp Scholarships, which to-date have helped to fund the travel and registration costs for 18 teenagers to attend camps in Colorado, California, and Maine. In 2008, GOS leaders participated in a ceremony that celebrated the permanent curation of over 200 of Dick's works at the Hargrett Special Collections Library at the University of Georgia in Athens. A contribution from the society helped to pay for the restoration of some of his paintings. And in January 2011, on banquet night at the society's 75th anniversary meeting (Dick's last), I had the privilege of introducing Dick to the 198 members who were in attendance to meet another gifted bird illustrator from a younger generation: David Sibley. The resulting standing ovation lasted several minutes.

Memoriams, by definition, read as biographical inventories, often telling the reader very little about the person behind the extraordinary accomplishments. Dick was an avid runner for many years and so he was always slim and carried himself with athletic fluidity, no matter how treacherous the birding terrain might be. Longtime friends remarked on his appreciation for good parties and good music. Dick was not just generous to the society; he was generous with his friends, he was humble, and he was inquisitive, always striving to learn more about birds, no matter who the teacher might be. He praised the work of other bird illustrators, past and contemporary, but he was not an admirer of the illustrations painted by Audubon, once commenting to me that the birds depicted in the legendary artist's paintings "looked dead." In the field he usually wore a baseball cap and an ancient pair of binoculars strapped to his neck. In addition to attending the general meetings for 65 years, he also routinely attended the society's business meetings, even after his hearing had gone bad. He would sit quietly in the back of the room at meetings of the Executive Committee, hand cupped behind one ear straining to pick up the conversation. He never presumed to offer advice unless he was asked to do so. His memory – until his last couple of years of life – was extraordinary, as he could readily recall and describe details of meetings and field trips from the 1950s and 1960s. He was often in pain caused by a troublesome eye, but refused to complain. Whenever he was asked how he was doing, he would chuckle and quip, "I'm still here!"

When the scholarship that bears his name was established, he sent one of his personally illustrated cards (a Peregrine Falcon on the cover) to me. He said he was honored to have the scholarship named for him, and was very pleased

to know his name would be associated with an effort to interest young people in birds and conservation. In September 2008, he sat in the front row for the ceremony in Athens when his art was inducted into the Hargrett Collection. Despite being less than 3 meters from the podium, it was clear that he could not hear the words of praise that were lauded on him that day. Later, when the remarks from that ceremony appeared in the *GOShawk* and he had a chance to read them, his eyes were brimming with emotion and his voice was choked when he approached me at a GOS meeting, proclaiming how unworthy he was to receive such accolades.

I was privileged to have known Dick, even if it was for just a brief span within the man's long life. What a remarkable difference this one person's life made in behalf of those who knew him, and in behalf of ornithology in Georgia, past and future.

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Dick Parks birding with Virginia and Roger Tory Peterson at the GOS's 50th anniversary meeting in Macon, Georgia, 1986. Photograph by John Swiderski.



Dick Parks and Bob Sargent at the GOS spring meeting in Clayton, Georgia, 2008. Photograph by Darlene Moore.



Past presidents and recipients of the GOS's Earle R. Greene Memorial Award gather for a group photo at the 75th anniversary meeting on Tybee Island, Georgia, 2011. Dick Parks is seated in the front row, third from the right. Photograph by Phil Hardy.