

IN MEMORIAM: JAMES LEE PETERS

BY ALEXANDER WETMORE

JAMES LEE PETERS, Patron, Fellow, and Past President of the American Ornithologists' Union, was born August 13, 1889, in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of Dr. Austin Peters and Frances Howie (Lee) Peters. His ancestry was English, the Peters family having come to the New World about 1634, the Lee family somewhat later, in the early eighteenth century (with a line tracing back to 1592 in Middlesex, England). His father, highly regarded as a veterinary surgeon, was educated at the Massachusetts Agricultural College (now the University of Massachusetts) and had long connection with the Milk Commission of the State of Massachusetts.

During early family residence in Jamaica Plain, James attended Miss Segar's private school, and later, from 1902 to 1908, was enrolled in the Roxbury Latin School. With this preparation he entered Harvard University, where he received his A.B. degree in 1912.

The interest in birds that was to govern his entire life began in early boyhood, fostered by the understanding of his parents. Through his father James came to the attention of A. C. Bent, and in 1904 he was allowed to accompany Bent, C. H. Townsend, and H. K. Job on a summer excursion to the Magdalen Islands. Bent told me long ago how "Jimmy," when on Bird Rock, cautioned to keep away from the cliff edge where the adult members of the party were busy with their cameras, occupied himself by gathering the numerous birds that had been killed by striking the lighthouse and sorting them carefully according to their species and genera, an early indication of his interest in systematics! About this same time James joined the bird-walks conducted by C. J. Maynard, as shown by the lists inscribed in his early journals of birds seen in Franklin Park, the Arnold Arboretum, and other favored spots. Another mentor of this early period was Judge Charles F. Jenney, of whom James often spoke in later years. James also was one of the prime movers in establishing the Norfolk Bird Club in late December 1908, and the following year served as editor of its journal, 'The Wren,' with Joseph Kittredge, Jr., associated with him as business manager, a short-lived venture, but an interesting one.

At Harvard it was natural that James would in due course meet Outram Bangs, with whom he soon developed the close and friendly association that was a major influence in developing the young ornithologist and in training him in the meticulous methods that governed his later work. Following graduation Peters began his travel



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years by accompanying an archaeological party from the Peabody Museum at Harvard to Quintana Roo, where he was occupied in making collections, mainly of birds, from January to April 1912. His report on this expedition, which appeared in "The Auk" the following year, was his first important publication. During the three succeeding field seasons Peters had service with the Biological Survey, U. S. Department of Agriculture (now a part of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior) on a basis of temporary employment in which he was occupied mainly in making collections of small mammals. This work began in 1914, when he travelled from mid-April until June in Alabama, and then in July joined E. A. Goldman and Ernest G. Holt in Arizona, where he continued until October. The following year, from the middle of May to August, Peters made a trip along the South Carolina coast and around Muskogee, Florida, mainly to gather data on Wood Ducks and other migratory birds. In some of the more remote areas, he told me, he was under definite suspicion of being a "revenooer" in search of illicit stills! In 1916, from February until early April, he made studies and collections of the birdlife of the northern part of the Dominican Republic for the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy. And then from the middle of May until the end of June continued with mammal work for the Biological Survey in the broken hill country where the boundaries of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina meet. On his return home, during summer and fall he completed a report on his work in the Dominican Republic, which was published by the Museum the following year.

Service in the U. S. Army in World War I followed immediately in 1917, and presently he was in France. At the close of hostilities he was stationed for a year with the army of occupation in Germany, until in 1919 he was returned to the United States to be mustered out with the rank of second lieutenant. Interestingly enough, his final papers were processed by another ornithologist still in service, Maunsell Crosby, whom he had not previously known.

At this time John C. Phillips was engaged actively in assembling data for his monograph of the ducks and on behalf of the Museum sent Peters to Argentina, where he worked in the late southern winter in Misiones and then moved to Río Negro in northern Patagonia for the summer season. I was in Argentina at the time, engaged in investigations on migratory birds for the Biological Survey, and happily our schedules coincided so that Peters and I travelled together during much of March and April 1921, first along the foothills of the Andes in Mendoza, and later in the Province of Tucumán.

During part of this period W. B. Alexander, travelling in search of some insect or other agency that might check the spread of cactus introduced in Australia, was also with us. On our return Peters and I joined in publishing on the systematics of parts of our collections where we both had obtained representative material.

Until this time Peters had worked regularly with Outram Bangs when he was in Cambridge, but on a volunteer basis. On return from South America he was appointed Assistant Ornithologist under Bangs, his title changing to Assistant Curator in 1928, and to Curator in 1932, the position that he occupied to the end.

There had been further field expeditions in the meanwhile, first to Anguilla in the British West Indies, in February 1922, and then to the Corn Islands in the western Caribbean in December 1927. At the close of this latter survey he continued in January 1928 to eastern Honduras where collections were made near Tela and Lancetilla until April. This was his last major foreign field work as then he became engrossed in studies of collections from other continents, particularly from Africa and Asia, and at the same time began a card catalog of the Museum's specimens of birds that entailed check on the identification of the entire collection. This became the foundation for his Check-list of Birds of the World that was his main occupation for the succeeding years of his life.

Preparation of the volumes of the Check-list involved a vast amount of labor. The last authoritative world-list had been that of R. Bowdler Sharpe, a most useful work but one behind our times due to great increases in knowledge in the systematic field. Furthermore the understanding of relationships and the criteria of distinction for geographic populations as entities had changed markedly. The subspecific concept had broadened, and there had come almost complete acceptance of the trinomial arrangement for listing closely related forms. Also, better understanding of the characters and limitations of genera had brought many changes from the narrower limits assigned by older workers, who often were handicapped by limited material. There were valuable handbooks available for better known areas, but even with these, much search of literature was necessary in any comprehensive systematic studies. Peters' volumes filled the gap in our working libraries admirably and immediately became of major assistance through the world. In fact, it seems reasonable to say that in the widest application they have been among the most valuable of the ornithological publications of their period, since directly or indirectly they have had effect on the work and publication of almost all who are interested in birds. The specialist has used

them as a key to current knowledge of different forms, and judgment expressed by Peters as to relationships has been accepted widely so that his opinions have spread into more popular channels.

The first volume of the series, including the orders through the Falconiformes, was published in 1931 and met with immediate acclaim among fellow systematists. The second volume followed in 1934, and others appeared steadily, to the seventh in 1951, which completed the lower groups of perching birds. The seven volumes with more than 2300 pages of text, are marked throughout by conservative, but at the same time comprehensive, treatment, sound judgment in interpretation, and accuracy in citation. The work stands as a lasting monument to the author. As one recognition of this merit Peters in 1940 was awarded the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union for the first four volumes.

While these check-list volumes comprise his major writings, Peters during these years published shorter papers steadily, dealing with special collections that came to the Museum from such diverse areas as Africa, Panamá, Perú, and Borneo. With these were scattered contributions concerned with systematics, nomenclature, and descriptions of new forms and genera, as well as numerous reviews.

While completing the check-list section covering the tropical ovenbirds, woodhewers, and related groups, Peters had arranged with Dr. John T. Zimmer to prepare the text for the volume on the tyrant flycatchers and associated families, as Zimmer had made an extensive review of these groups. Peters himself continued with the first of the oscinine families, writing me that it was interesting again to be studying families of world-wide distribution after many months of occupation with groups found only in the Western Hemisphere. Our final correspondence in this field dealt mainly with problems concerned with the swallows, and it is pleasant to know that he completed this family and also that of the larks. By good fortune the project of the completion of the check-list through a cooperative effort on the part of a number of ornithologists is now well in hand.

In the American Ornithologists' Union, James was elected an Associate on November 28, 1904, at a meeting held appropriately in "Mr. William Brewster's Museum," and remained active in our affairs for a period of more than 37 years. He was advanced to the status of Member in 1918 at a business meeting held in New York City, and of Fellow in 1928. His direct service in Union affairs began almost immediately in 1929 when he was elected to the Council, where he remained continuously until he became Vice-President in

1938. And finally he served for the customary three terms as President from 1942 to 1945. Through the chance of national affairs his term as head of the Union came during the period in World War II when public meetings could not be held so that his was a strictly business administration. He had however served his full time in presiding at general meetings during his 5 years as Vice-President.

In activities concerned with birds of the Boston area Peters became a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club during his freshman year at Harvard, when he was elected on December 7, 1908, through nomination by William Brewster. From the end of 1922 to 1932 he served as Secretary of the club, then as a member of the Council until December 1939, when he became Vice-President. He was elected President of the organization in March 1942 and served in that capacity until his death.

He was active also in the operations of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association, being on the Council as one of the vice-presidents from 1938 until his death and serving as Editor of the quarterly magazine 'Bird-Banding,' from 1939 to 1950.

Among other scientific connections, Peters was a member of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, in the end serving as its President. His memberships other than those that have been mentioned, included the Cooper Ornithological Society, the Washington Academy of Sciences, the American Society of Mammalogists, and the Society of Systematic Zoologists. He was also a Fellow of the American Academy of Sciences, a member of Sigma Xi, and was elected to corresponding membership in the Deutsche Ornithologische Gesellschaft, and the Sociedad Ornitológica del Plata, and to honorary membership in the Ornithologische Gesellschaft in Bayern.

Peters' home life was centered in the family farm located at the edge of the town of Harvard, where he resided with his mother following the death of his father. His marriage to Eleanor K. Sweet came in 1932, and in her congenial companionship he continued to live in Harvard, driving daily to Cambridge except in winter, when it was usual for them to move temporarily to an apartment near the Museum. James used to tell me that his main farm crops were Barn Swallows from the old barn, and apples from the orchard! In later years he planted part of the acreage in timber trees and rented out the orchard area.

In addition to his work in science, Peters had many outside interests. In local affairs he took great pride in his membership in the volunteer fire department, where he was secretary and treasurer. For a number

of years he was active in the administration of the Community Memorial Hospital, where he was secretary of the Executive Committee and served also on the Building Committee. From his service in World War I, he was a member of the American Legion, and for seven years was Commander of the local post. Local amateur theatricals comprised another interest through which he appeared in some twenty plays.

In field work and observation Peters had a quick eye, a keen ear, and an interest that never slowed. In the preparation of museum specimens he was skilful, far more rapid than the majority of naturalists, and did not shirk the labor involved in handling the larger and more difficult birds. However, I recall one incident when we were together in the Andean foothills of Argentina, where Jim and I crouched under the shelter of bushes watching a pair of condors circling overhead, each of us hoping silently that the great birds would *not* come within range! At the time we were several miles from our horses, and far from our temporary living quarters, so that a pair of condors would have posed a considerable problem. Fortunately, we had the pleasure of watching their majestic flight until they passed out of sight.

As a man Peters was quiet in demeanor, and at the same time wholly friendly to those of congenial interests around him. In our work together as young men in the field, he had always unfailing acceptance of our circumstances, regardless of whether we fared well or badly in the often bizarre surroundings that attended our mutual desires to investigate the birds of remote or difficult areas. Although short in stature, he was strong and active physically, and unfailingly cheerful with a dry humor that never deserted him.

My own association with him endured through a period of forty years with a steadfast friendship in which we had many differences in professional opinion but with no hint of personal misunderstandings, bickering, or quarrels. In later years Peters and I corresponded with fair regularity, usually regarding various ornithological problems and discoveries. At intervals, more regularly in Cambridge than in Washington, we worked together in the museums, and on weekends made minor excursions afield, sharing our mutual interests on all possible occasions. Inevitably our talk drifted to South America and elsewhere in reminiscences of travels that had given James and the writer the nicknames by which we were known among our more intimate friends.

In his scientific studies and in his writings Peters displayed clear judgment and painstaking meticulous study of available facts that

formed the sound and reasonable basis found throughout his written work. Where questions of nomenclature were concerned, his wise understanding of difficult problems, and his clearcut adherence to the fundamental law of priority that is the only firm and lasting basis for decision left no uncertainty as to his actions. In all these matters he was direct, forthright, and unhesitating in expressing judgment once he was sure of his grounds. In studies of local occurrences he was particularly definite in his refusal to accept unusual records based on casual sight observation, demanding that these be substantiated by a specimen or by some other means concerning which there could be no question.

Peters' assistance was especially valuable in the A.O.U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, where he served from the beginning of the work on the fifth edition of the check-list. These activities, and his work on his own world list continued until his death from a heart condition, which came in Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge on April 19, 1952. As a posthumous honor, in 1956 the name of James Lee Peters was inscribed on the records of the Union as Patron, through the interest of Mrs. Herbert E. Carnes. *Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.*