
In Memoriam: George Miksch Sutton 1898-1982

GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON died in Norman, Oklahoma on December 7, 1982, and an era came to an end. As the protégé of Louis Agassiz Fuertes he carried forward a great artistic tradition, and by example and by his generous counsel helped to nurture an entire generation of talented younger artists. Although our friendship dated only from a day of birding together during an A O U. convention in Buffalo in 1970, he was always interested in *American Birds*, and when he joined our Editorial Advisory Board, by his own request, he favored us with frequent thoughtful and useful advice, good-natured criticism, and occasionally even praise. His career as ornithologist, explorer, artist and author enriched the lives of thousands, but it was the artists he influenced and inspired who loved him best. To them he was not only a wise, tolerant, patient and generous mentor, but a beloved friend. We have asked a few of them to remember "Doc" Sutton in their own words.

—Robert Arbib

GEORGE SUTTON was always generous, handing down his enthusiasms and his knowledge of bird drawing to those of the next generation—Dilger, Gilbert, Grossenheider, Malick, Mengel, and O'Neill—to name a few. His most rewarding accomplishment, he once said, was his work with young people. "As I watch them, considering what they have done, and see them achieving, I sense what immortality must be."

During his long and creative life he bridged the gap from the "shotgun school of ornithology" to modern field techniques. His painting evolved from functional bird illustration under the guidance of Fuertes to a more Audubonesque treatment in his Mexican birds and finally to the highly personalized and sensitive interpretation of Arctic birds which marked his later years. His birds always had the gleam of life, to paint them he preferred to examine them alive in the hand, if he could manage it.

—Roger Tory Peterson

THE SAD TIDINGS of the death of George Sutton was somewhat ameliorated by my abiding joy in what he gave me in his painting, his writing, and his friendship. His was a long, fruitful and illustrious career. His work says to all, what I personally knew he was, a sensitive and gentle man.

—Don Richard Eckelberry

IF PAINTERS OF BIRDS were mountains and ranked according to height, it would be years before the completed survey of Mount Sutton permitted its placement. But the familiar shape of the mountain has quietly dominated the American skyline of living bird painters for years.

Whatever the eventual assessment of history, George Miksch Sutton, aside from singular integrity and an immense fund of hard-earned knowledge, possessed a quality increasingly rare in our time—Class. He stood out from his surroundings.

Take one example. In 1968, at the mature age of 70, he spent a whole summer in the high arctic, painting with astonishing energy a long series of large, pure watercolors—essentially landscape with birds—unlike anything he or any other bird painter seems to have done before. The best of these pictures are splendid, and should be seen in the original; far from all are in the resulting book. Not even considering Doc's previously very limited attention to landscape or pure watercolor as such, the series is truly remarkable. It caused some of his more prosaic followers to conclude, as one reported to me, that he had "flipped his lid and gone 'modern'!" I know of nothing much like them anywhere in painting, unless it be some of Rockwell Kent's work.

Doc Sutton spent very little time resting on his many laurels; hence, no doubt, their number.

—Robert M. Mengel

IT IS INDEED A very strange feeling to realize that George Sutton is now

gone. I remember the excitement of opening my letter of acceptance to the University of Oklahoma in 1960, which meant I would be privileged to actually meet the man and maybe I would even get to know him. Well, I not only got to know him, but consider him to have had a tremendous influence upon my artwork. As I review his "help," I realize that he was not prone to offer much about "art" per se, but he did not spare any words when he "preached" about accuracy—to him a person's drawing was to be done only one way—correctly. And this included not only the bird, but everything in the picture. The way one painted, on the other hand, was for him to develop as an individual.

George Sutton and I kept up through the years and often talked of the excitement instilled in us whether from a flock of macaws screaming across a tropical river or a tiny plover chick that had just entered its cold arctic world. It is hard to write with brevity about such a wonderful person, but I shall always remember "Doc Sutton" as a gentleman, a humorist, a great naturalist, and one of the best portrayals of birds that the world will ever know. He shall indeed be missed by his friends and by those who will never have the honor and privilege of knowing him.

—John P. O'Neill

WHAT A TOUGH JOB! Anyone who knew Doc Sutton could relate volumes but a sentence or two. . . ?

I knew him from 1939 on but it's very difficult to pinpoint *the* most memorable thing about him. His craftsmanship is renown. He was remarkably sensitive to color and form as well as to his associates. He helped me more than I could ever adequately describe. We catalogued birds together for the Cornell collection many hours before WWII and the experience was unforgettable. The war came and four long years later "Doc" and I once again found ourselves cataloguing skins at the same table and in the same chairs as though those interminable years never happened. I remember one day we were reminiscing as

we worked and I remarked, "those were the good old days." He looked at me and said something I will never forget. "You know, Bill, every day will some day be one of the good old days." It has helped me over the years and I suspect he always lived so that each day became "one of the good old days."

—Bill Dilger

AS AN ARTIST, George Sutton will be ranked with Audubon and Fuertes as one of the great American painters of bird life; as a man, he will be held in even greater esteem by all who came within his orbit. His influence, profound and pivotal, upon generations of aspiring artists—most of whom worked under his direct tutelage—resulted in what has been called the "Fuertes-Sutton Tradition" in American bird painting.

I shall always remember "Doc" with love, not only as a brilliant artist and teacher, but more importantly as a modest, thoughtful, and generous friend and gentleman.

—Al Gilbert

ONE SUNNY morning in May five years ago I found myself by the most incredible circumstances on a cool, shaded verandah in Colima, Mexico. I was seated at a table, painting, and in my right hand was a Rose-throated Becard, very much alive and indignant. Just 30 feet away, at a small table and also with paintbrush, and intent upon his work, was George Miksch Sutton. All was quiet save for the birds flying about the sunny courtyard and the swish of a broom as the servant girl swept the courtyard tiles.

A muffled, persistent little noise, a kind of scrubbing sound, then was heard. I looked up, and saw that it was Doc, erasing. It went on and on. I put my model gently in a holding bag, and went (dared) to approach the artist. He had been painting a trio of Barred Quail, and the birds were nearly finished, but now, to my surprise and horror, I saw that he had obliterated one bird's breast and back! All those bars, all that scrubbing! In art school they had taught us that you couldn't tamper with water color, but rules are made to be broken, at least if you are George Sutton.

"It just wasn't right. I just had to do it over," was all he said. "Oh," was all I said. He resumed his scrubbing and I wondered what would happen when he attempted to repaint. He soon finished his scrubbing and put the unfinished painting away, to be worked on later.

Two years later, at an exhibit at Wausaw, Wisconsin, I suddenly came face to face with the Barred Quail painting—three little birds mincing daintily along the dusty road. They could have walked right out of the painting, so alive they were, and even the most discriminating ornithologist could not have found an error anywhere.

I used to envy those who knew him for many years and traveled with him, or studied with him over long periods of time. In the end, I am grateful for the brief happy time we shared in Colima and for all the thoughtful letters he took time to write me. He led a long, fine life, noble to the end. He probably influenced me more than anyone I ever met. Words were really not that necessary. He did not tell me "how" to do things; he taught me how to be my own prime mover, and that patience, humility, persistence and a questing for the truth still count.

—Diane Pierce

GEORGE SUTTON began advising me informally on my early bird-painting efforts while I was still in high school. Later on, when I entered the University of Michigan, our association developed further, and during my graduate student days there I studied formally under him. Virtually everything I know about bird painting—and a generous amount of sound ornithology—I acquired during those splendid years at Ann Arbor.

The training was invaluable, not merely because of the important specifics learned from day to day, but because of the attitudes, the way in which one learned to approach something, learning to pay real attention to detail, and remaining with something until it was correct. Sutton transferred to his students his commitment to accuracy in all aspects of an endeavor—not just in turning out a drawing or painting, but in preparing a birdskin, recording observations, editing a manuscript or anything else.

Doc never was hesitant to hand out deserved criticism, but always he

managed it so artistically that acceptance was near painless. He was long on encouragement, too, when he felt it warranted. Convincing, compelling, charming, subtly cajoling, he regularly stimulated his students to produce in ways unrealized by most college professors. And he never lost his touch. It was he, only five years ago, who persuaded me to pick up my paintbrushes after a decade and a half of inactivity in the bird-painting realm.

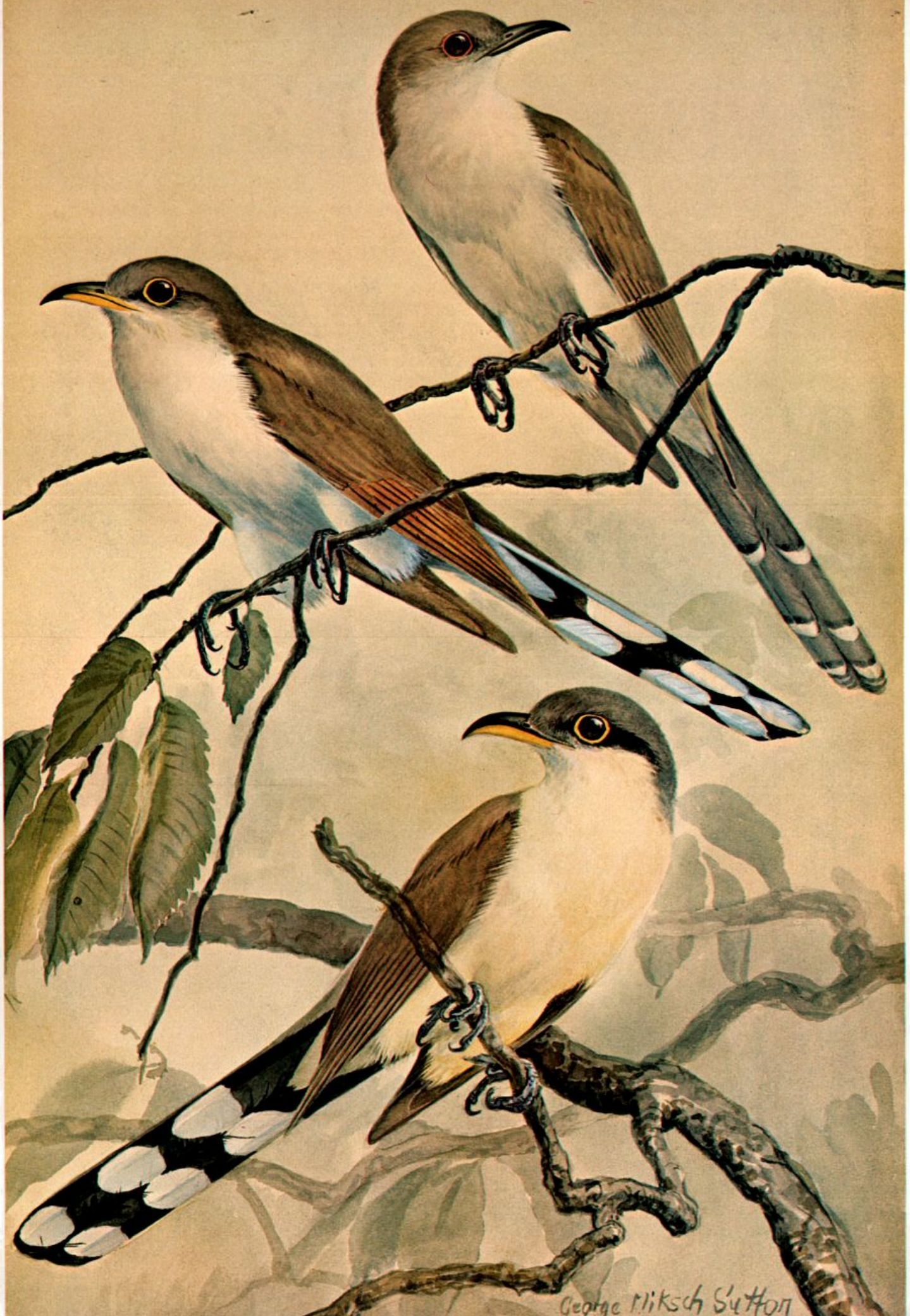
I can't help but view Doc's passing as more than the death of a man. He was one of the last of the old school with its emphasis on specimens and collections, on the down-to-earth business of carefully watching birds in the field and on the recorded information being presented eloquently and *interestingly*, unfettered by sophisticated analytical treatment. A number of men of Doc's vintage wrote well, of course; happily a few of them remain with us, but Doc was in a class by himself.

For all his devotion to science, to ornithology *per se*, Sutton often would tune out that facet of his being to merely enjoy birds and the outdoor world. I recall one grand autumn day when the two of us were tramping among the coloring sumac and sassafras of the Edwin S. George Reserve in southern Michigan—one of Doc's favorite places. Birds were abundant and we saw two or three warblers which we knew to be unusual so late in the season. They were confiding and in exquisitely fresh plumage which delighted us. We watched them closely for some time. I rather suspected that Doc was secretly wishing for his collecting gun, but I was quite wrong. When I uttered something about making a note on the warblers' somewhat untimely presence he merely said, "You know, Dale, there are times when it just seems better *not* to record a particular bird on a particular day." To have done so—just then, at least—would have robbed him of some of the obvious pleasure he derived from viewing those warblers so perfectly and in such a perfect setting. Such incidents were frequent enough to suggest that Sutton the ornithologist was subservient to Sutton the artist and savant, but in all his roles he served us admirably.

—Dale A. Zimmerman

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Cuckoos by G.M. Sutton, from *Bird-Lore*, 33:4 (1931) t. to b. *Black-billed, Yellow-billed, Mangrove*.



George Miksch Sutton