

Dear Roger,

Several days have passed since I heard the news—since that July evening when, closing your eyes for the last time, you went on to seek whatever birds live beyond the horizon. Yet here I am, writing a letter you will never read. A psychologist might say I'm in denial. So be it. Some things are worth denying. I don't want to believe that the greatest naturalist of our time is gone forever.

Admittedly, the news has been confirmed in the press. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News* each ran a full-page obituary, giving at least a slight reflection of the importance you have had to the public at large. Ever since 1934, your field guides have been opening people's eyes—making them aware of orioles and trilliums and swallowtails, creating generations that care about nature, laying the foundation for the environmental movement. No doubt that has been your biggest impact on the world. But in talking to scores of birders in recent days, I have been struck by a different point: Most of us feel your passing in a very personal way. Even birders you never met feel that you touched their lives directly, and now they feel a keen personal sense of loss.

For those of us in the birding world, you have been important both for what you accomplished and for what you have meant to us. Part of the latter resulted from the way you excelled at everything: painting, writing, photography, public speaking, traveling, birding. And maybe part of it was the way you proved that, once in a great while, a birdwatcher can change the world. But there was more to it than that.

You were always so far ahead of the rest of us. Not just in birding things—like the way you pointed out the differences between Alder and Willow flycatchers, decades before they were officially split—but also in larger issues.

You gave us a stellar example with the elegant simplicity of your field guides. So often, experts want to make things complicated, to make themselves look superior. You, with your awesome expertise, were not afraid to make things simple instead. You welcomed people in. You understood from the start that describing minutiae of a bird's feathers was less important than promoting appreciation of the bird.

You showed us, too, the importance of other aspects of natural history. Today more birders are catching on, going out to count butterflies and identify wildflowers, but you had been promoting such activities for years. The Peterson Series did not stop with birds, and neither did your writing or artwork. The way all of nature is interrelated had been a theme of your writing at least since the 1940s.

So, too, with the importance of conservation. Today we take it for granted that birders should be environmentalists also, but you helped to bring about this connection. The essential link between education and conservation is something else that you promoted long before it became generally accepted.

I am just one of the innumerable people who have learned these things from you, and who is now numbed by an aching sense of loss. But your biggest lesson for me was one I did not learn quite soon enough. It began with that review—sharply critical of one of your books, written when I was a young know-it-all, a punk kid rebelling against a father figure. At the time I hardly knew you, and I was stunned later to learn that you had read the review and had been genuinely hurt by it.

Of course you never said anything about it directly to me, and later you were generous enough to treat me as a friend. But in all the hours of conversation that we had in later years, I never heard you resort to the kind of harsh criticism I had used. You found something good to say about virtually every person, every book or magazine. And I felt more and more chagrin as I recalled how caustically I had criticized your work. Surely that was the wrong approach. Once again, with your gentle and generous approach to others, you were showing us the way. While regretting my own past actions, I can only wish that your example would influence more of today's self-styled hot-shot birders, who know so little and yet are so quick to heap criticism on each other.

Looking back, thinking how your life was productive enough for five ordinary lives, thinking how much you were doing right up to the end of your 87 years, it still seems that you were taken from us much too soon. It seems that someone who has given so much to the world ought to be with us longer—ought to be immortal. But in some important ways, Roger, you are.

With the greatest respect,

KENN KAUFMAN

An Open Letter to Roger Tory Peterson

