

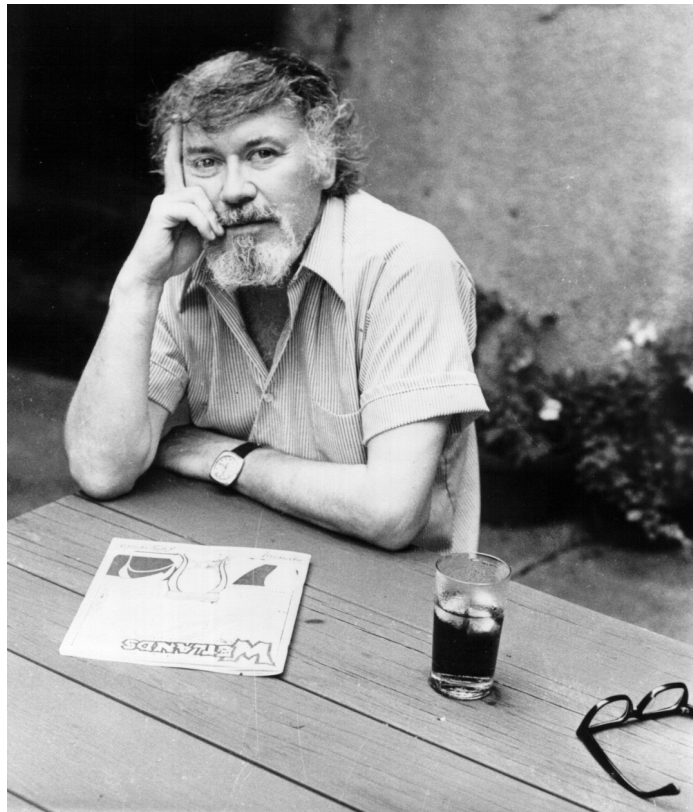
## OBITUARIES

Edited by James Wiley

(To whom obituary manuscripts should be sent)

**Don Richard Eckelberry**—Don Eckelberry died in Babylon, New York on 14 January 2001, a few months shy of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. An artist of penetrating insight, he leaves behind a legacy of bird portraiture in

direct descent from the legendary Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Don's own source of inspiration. Born near Sebring, Ohio on 6 July 1921, he was roaming the countryside, and observing and sketching birds from his earli-



Don Richard Eckelberry, 1921–2001.  
(Photograph by Thomas S. Zawyrucha, taken in the late 1970's.)

est years forward. From this initial foundation Eckelberry, more than any other contemporary artist of nature, constructed a line of thinking and a body of work that provided an intellectual and aesthetic bridge between the bird painting of Fuertes and the present generation of American artists who paint birds. If the genius of Roger Tory Peterson was describing the external subject, capturing details essential for identification, then Don's genius was the portrayal of the internal bird, giving it vibrant character and linking it convincingly with nature.

While still in his mid twenties, Don began, with Richard Pough, the composition of the *Audubon Bird Guides*. His illustrations for this series were stunning and referred to by Robert Cushman Murphy as a "consummate success." A new standard had been set for bird guide illustration. He would go on to contribute writing and paintings to another 16 important ornithological books and an equal number of articles, all the while advancing his artistic interpretation of his subjects.

By the 1950s, Eckelberry, as he would say, had painted his way out of North America and began to look southward. With his friends Ed Chalif and Dean Amadon, he began the first of many field expeditions in the tropics with a trip into Mexico. Over the next 30 years he actively studied and sketched the avifauna in the open country and forests of Central and South America, Trinidad, the Greater Antilles, and most of the Windward Islands. In the field continuously, his intimacy with his subjects allowed him to fashion some of the most vibrant interpretations of tropical birds ever painted. Many of these images would appear in Alexander Skutch's *Life Histories of Central American Birds* and *Birds of the West Indies* by James Bond. His insightful notes on the behavior of tropical birds resulted in valuable scientific papers published in the *Condor*, *Wilson Bulletin*, and *Living Bird*. Distinguished contributions such as

these led to his election to the position of Fellow in the American Ornithologists' Union and his service on the Executive Board of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology.

Amid all his professional and personal commitments, Eckelberry also dedicated time and talent on behalf of land conservation causes. He gave countless speeches, contributed his art to raise funds, and pestered decision makers to secure additions to Florida's Corkscrew Swamp. That the Asa Wright Nature Center in Trinidad exists today is a direct result of Don's relentless efforts to gather support for its establishment and operation. For such initiative he was recognized as Florida's *Conservationist of the Year*. His artistic efforts have likewise been recognized as he was one of the first recipients of the Woodson Art Museum's *Master Wildlife Artist Award* and the Society of Animal Artists presented him with their *Award of Merit*.

For the past 40 years the Eckelberry home has been a hub of activity centering on matters of nature and art. Painters, sculptors, poets, writers, scientists, and abundant friends from throughout the world would stop by for a visit and would always leave restored and invigorated from the feasts that Virginia Eckelberry would serve up and the banquet of social joy and inquiry that accompanied each meal. Art and artists were always under discussion, with Don sharing stories of places and people that had enriched his life. It was easy to prowl about a forest in Mexico with Eckelberry as he described the "broccoli-textured canopy" where he was "surrounded by its green cloistral gloom" as he watched "soft-plumaged squirrel cuckoos flowing through the trees."

Those who knew him will miss his passionate response to an original idea or work of art and his unflagging encouragement to seek our own genius. We are fortunate that his prodigious body of extraordinary work will always speak out clearly over many gener-

ations to come and the memory of his spirit of generosity and kindness will endure through those he touched so deeply.

For those wishing to honor Don Eckelberry's memory, an endowment has been established in his name at the Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia. Its purpose is to issue generous grants that will assist aspiring artists of nature in their work. Those interested in making a tax-deductible contribution or applying for such a grant should

visit the Endowment web site at [www.eckelberry.org](http://www.eckelberry.org). Along with artistic images, the Eckelberry Endowment web site will periodically post portions of Don Eckelberry's journals and numerous essays related to both natural history and art. The extraordinary breadth and depth of Don's thinking is best revealed when reading these references. — Tony Angell, 18237 40<sup>th</sup> Ave. N.E., Seattle, Washington 98155, USA.

