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IN MEMORIAM: RALPH SIMON PALMER, 1914–2003

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Ralph Simon Palmer, best known as the author and editor of the *Handbook of North American Birds* (Yale University Press), died in Bangor, Maine, on 21 July 2003 after a brief illness. He was 89.

Ralph was born in Richmond, Maine, on 13 June 1914, the eldest of four children born to Marion Holmes and George Luther Palmer. Seven years later the family moved to Brunswick, Maine, where Ralph attended high school, began collecting books, assisted the noted Bowdoin College ornithologist, Alfred O. Gross, and joined the AOU in 1932. He was a life member of the AOU and became an Elective Member in 1947 and a Fellow in 1956. He graduated with high honors from the University of Maine in 1937; his honors thesis, "Mammals of Maine," remains a standard reference. He received his doctorate from Cornell University in 1940 for his work on the nesting behavior of Common Terns.

After working briefly at the State of New York Conservation Department, Ralph accepted a teaching position at Vassar College in 1942, where he remained an assistant professor until 1949. His academic career was interrupted by World War II; he served as an ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve and was in the third wave to land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. In August 1949, he was appointed as a senior scientist of the New York State Museum and State Science Service, where he worked for 27 years.

Having retired to Maine, Ralph built his own house in Tenant's Harbor with the help of his sons, Keith and Douglas. Among several of the distinctive features of this house was the climate-controlled basement that housed his enormous personal library. Keenly interested in art, especially wildlife art, Ralph designed his living room to display a stunning painting of a red fox in winter by renowned Swedish artist Bruno Liljefors.

In 1978, Ralph was appointed as research associate of the Smithsonian Institution, a post he held for five years, and in 1981 he was appointed as a faculty associate in zoology and forest resources at the University of Maine at Orono. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Maine at Machias in 1994.

Ralph received the William Brewster Memorial Medal, the AOU's most prestigious award, for writing and editing the *Handbook of North American Birds* series, which was partially subsidized by the AOU. Ralph had hoped to emulate Arthur C. Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds*, providing updated species accounts for all North American birds. However, the *Handbook* project was hindered by numerous delays; the fourth and fifth volumes, which covered raptors, appeared 26 years after the first volume. The AOU ultimately withdrew its support of the *Handbook*, in favor of *The Birds of North America*, which was completed in 2003.

Disgruntled with that loss of financial support, Ralph dropped his AOU membership and returned his Brewster award, obviously distressed that he would not complete a project on which he had worked so very hard. He had already collected material for future volumes, at least through the owls, and now recognized that all that effort was in vain.

Despite removing himself from the ornithological mainstream, he maintained many strong friendships and an active correspondence. He felt a particular bond with Allan R. Phillips; they had both taken part in the Allied landing in France in World War II and were both viewed as outsiders. Ralph did not suffer fools lightly, and he was unwilling to discuss matters in detail unless he felt that the receiver measured up to his considerable standards.

Ralph was noted for the depth and breadth of his interests and knowledge—about birds, mammals, Native Americans, history, early exploration, naturalists, geology, plants, philosophy, and wildlife art. He was an accomplished photographer and painter. In short, he was a scholar and naturalist in the fullest

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Ralph Simon Palmer, 1914–2003
(Photograph taken by Marge Cook at Tenant's Harbor, Maine, 2002)

sense of the words. *Maine Birds* (Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, vol. 102) remains the definitive state reference on the distribution and ecology of the state's avifauna, and is replete with names of and information on Native Americans of Maine. Ralph wrote and illustrated *The Mammal Guide* (Doubleday, 1954). He was one of the first ornithologists to understand, advocate, and use the Humphrey-Parkes approach to molts and plumages.

The ultimate compendious "pack rat," Ralph showed remarkable zeal for collecting and cataloguing scientific, natural-history, historical, and other information. What distinguished him was his extraordinary care and diligence in maintaining a meticulous filing system. Every photograph he had taken since grade school had been saved and carefully catalogued. Leaving little to chance, in 1996, he sent Stuart Houston his recent portrait for possible use in his *Auk* memorial! Ralph continued to take photographs until he died, and he regularly sent them as Christmas cards to his friends; inevitably, these cards had an ironic twist. For example, in December 2000, Ralph sent a self portrait beside a sign reading, "Many Happy Returns—Redemption Center," with a single comment, "Next Stop? Great Redemption Center in the Sky."

Ralph left the Fogler Library at the University of Maine several separate collections, including The Manly Hardy Collection (see www.library.umaine.edu/friends/otree/otv9n2/hardy.htm), a collection of rare books on the Maine woods, Indians, and 19th-century explorations, and his reprint collection, which measured approximately 170 linear feet! He had also amassed a large collection of printed materials and artifacts pertaining to early Maine natural history. He donated his extraordinarily diverse mammal collection of >1,700 specimens to the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University; the collection came with very complete data (sex, body measurements, specific localities, and dates). Curatorial assistant Judith Chupasko commented that "because of their diversity and excellent data, these specimens have become an invaluable asset to the MCZ collection and to future studies in mammalogy."

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He disposed of his remarkable book collection through Watkins Natural History Books. Connie Watkins recounted that these books have been sold all over the world, and were valued

> not only for content but, in many cases, were purchased because they belonged to Ralph Palmer and had his name in them. Selling his books was not easy for Ralph and he constantly pulled a book back, that he thought he may need for his ongoing research.

Ralph had a special affection for and connection to the Arctic, and loved to talk of his visits to the eider farms in Iceland. He also visited Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Hudson Strait, Bathurst Island, Alberta; and in Alaska, the Brooks Range and the Aleutian and Pribiloff islands. His final trip north was a hunting expedition to northern Quebec in 1992.

Ralph is survived by his first wife, Eunice Palmer; his second wife, Nancy R. Palmer; two sisters; two sons; one daughter, and three grandchildren. He is also survived by his longtime friend and companion, Marge Cook.

The *Bangor Daily News*, 26–27 July 2003, advised that "those wishing to honor Ralph's memory can purchase a subscription to a science publication for their local high school biology class," undoubtedly as Ralph would have wished.

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