

Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography & Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson

Source: The Auk, 125(4) : 991-993

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2008.41008>

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Book Reviews



EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

The Auk 125(4):991–993, 2008
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Printed in USA.

Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography.—Douglas Carlson. 2007. University of Texas Press, Austin. 296 pp., 7 black-and-white illustrations, 8 black-and-white photographs. ISBN 978-0-292-71680-3. Cloth, \$24.95.

Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson.—Elizabeth J. Rosenthal. 2008. Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut. 437 pp., 12 color photographs, 13 black-and-white photographs. ISBN 978-1-59921-294-4. Cloth, \$29.95.—Roger Tory Peterson would have been 100 years old in 2008, and during this centennial year there will be thoughtful evaluation and celebration of his contributions to art and science. Through his field guides and books such as *Wild America* (Peterson and Fisher 1955), he contributed immensely to the popularity of birding, stimulating some to seek professional training in ornithology and others to engage in a life-long avocational pursuit of birds, enhancing prospects for conservation, and contributing substantially to the development and growth of modern ecotourism. Peterson's name and his positive influence on the popular understanding of birds are known worldwide, and he has been widely recognized for his contributions. A biography of Peterson was inevitable. We now have three book-length biographies of Roger Tory Peterson. The first, by Devlin and Naismith (1977), was published with Peterson's "blessing" but got mixed reviews in the ornithological literature. The more recent biographies reviewed here include two more decades of Roger's life and, arguably, the three decades of greatest change in birding technology and field-guide proliferation.

Peterson was a formally trained artist, and not a formally trained ornithologist or scientist, yet he left an impressive legacy that transcended both art and science. His "following" was foremost a popular audience, and it is not surprising that each of the three biographies focuses on his field guides, his other popular books, his teaching through the National Audubon Society and lectures, his conservation efforts, and his birding travels.

Each biography is indexed, and each has some bibliographic annotation. All are illustrated, and all seem to be primarily for an audience interested in birding and birding history. The authors of

all three books come from backgrounds in English or journalism, though each also has some interest in birding. None has a background in ornithology, and all three books betray some authorial weakness in ornithological parlance. Devlin and Naismith write of Peterson's comments about his paintings of "mocking birds" and "bluejays." Rosenthal betrays a bit of unfamiliarity with the nuances of common descriptors for birds when she refers to Wilson's Snipe as a "species of waterfowl" (p. 11). Carlson's treatment of Roger's receiving the William Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) suggests that he does not understand the significance of one of the AOU's most prestigious awards. He refers to it as the "Brewster Memorial Award for Nature Writing" (p. 93) and does not mention that it came from the AOU. The authors of the other two biographies correctly identify the award and its significance.

Rosenthal's book is organized topically, with some chronological underpinnings. It provides the best account of Peterson's home life, his marriage to Barbara Coulter Peterson, and their children. Her topics focus on major periods and major events in Peterson's life, such as his *Wild America* trip with James Fisher and his involvement with the issue of DDT in birds in general and in Ospreys near his home. The latter topics are covered in all three books, but most thoroughly by Rosenthal. She paints with a broader brush but provides many details about Peterson and considerable insight on the perspectives of others. She often digresses from Peterson's life to discuss how others have responded to his influence. Many digressions are excellent; some seem more of the nature of a "testimonial." Regarding *Wild America*, Rosenthal discusses books written by others about trips that were stimulated by that of Peterson and Fisher. Interviews and quotations from correspondence relevant to major topics present important historical insight of value far beyond the life of Peterson.

Rosenthal's chapter 13 ("World-wide Progeny") includes a series of vignettes about individuals who were, in one way or another, personally mentored by Peterson: Paul Spitzer, Tom Lovejoy, William Burt, Rob Hernandez, Fleur Ng'weno, and

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Peterson's son, Lee Allen Peterson. Others, such as E. O. Wilson, Hal Harrison, Victor Emanuel, Peter Alden, David Allen Sibley, Kenn Kaufman, Pete Dunne, and the Swedish-American artists Lars Jonsson and Kent Ullberg also considered Peterson a mentor as a result of how his books influenced them. Lee Allen Peterson is included because he authored *A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants of Eastern and Central North America* (1978, 1982), though he then decided not to follow in his father's footsteps. The accounts provided demonstrate Roger Tory Peterson's broad influence on modern natural-history field guides and ecotourism.

Organized chronologically, Carlson's book provides more of a month-by-month account, including a lot of small details and anecdotes that are not included in Rosenthal's broader sweep. His account does the best job of identifying factors that influenced Peterson and presents the most complete historical perspective. His is a much more focused account, rarely straying far from Peterson himself. In general, Carlson has been more analytical and succinct, and his work provides the best documentation for future scholars.

Carlson includes a balanced discussion (chapter 34) of negative reviews that were published by many in the birding and scientific community following publication of the fourth edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds* (Peterson 1980), describing Peterson's response to them as revealed in his correspondence with close friends. He was devastated and angry. Peterson wrote to Ron Naven that he was "pissed off about Ken Parkes' review" (p. 225), but later wrote to Parkes, admitting to some problems with the guide and defending it against others that Parkes had suggested, noting that he should have consulted him, and expressing that he valued their long association.

Devlin and Naismith's book is more of a blend of the chronological and topical approaches. It is the only biography that includes color plates of some of Peterson's artwork (15 plates, though all from 1968–1977). At the time this first biography was being written, Peterson was determined to do more painting of birds in their habitats as opposed to field-guide art, and I'm certain he very much wanted some of that art included. Only Devlin and Naismith include an appendix that lists (though incompletely) the many honors and awards that Peterson received.

Carlson includes samples of Peterson's art, ranging from line drawings to watercolor portraits, from throughout his life. Very interesting is Carlson's inclusion of a plate for duck identification done by Ernest Thompson Seton (1903), a clear influence on Peterson's field guides. Rosenthal includes none of Peterson's art except for drawings and paintings in the background of three photographs.

Among these three books, we are treated to 63 photographs, nearly half of which are in Devlin and Naismith. Those in Carlson are scattered at appropriate places throughout the text, reproduced small, and not on glossy paper. Those in Devlin and Naismith and in Rosenthal are in separate sections on glossy paper. However, only two photos appear in more than one of the books: a 1925 photo of a young Peterson at his job painting "Chinese" designs on furniture appears both in Devlin and Naismith and in Carlson, and one of Peterson with his camera, taken in 1995 in Texas, appears in Carlson (black-and-white) and in Rosenthal (color). By far the best selection of photos is in Devlin and Naismith, including photos of Roger from infancy to old age, both

of his parents, all three of his wives, and photos with a number of colleagues. Many are outstanding candid shots. Carlson includes only eight photos, all of Peterson, but a good selection ranging from the teenage years to old age. Rosenthal's photos also range from Peterson's teen years to old age and are the best reproduced, though with some redundancy in studio shots and Antarctic photos. Rosenthal includes individual photos of some of Peterson's colleagues: Clarence Allen, William Vogt, and Lars-Eric Lindblad, as well as photos of Peterson with others.

There is also little duplication of specific text materials among these books, but both Rosenthal and Devlin and Naismith include a remarkable 1976 New Year's letter from Roger and Barbara Peterson to their friends announcing that they were parting ways but remaining friends. Carlson addresses the strain between Roger and Barbara, noting that they had essentially been living apart, though Barbara continued to manage Roger's schedule. His treatment of the end of their marriage is terse: "In March 1976 they divorced."

Do we have a definitive biography of Roger Tory Peterson? Perhaps we're close. A substantial part of his life is covered—mostly the public part, field guides, and travel, which of course dominated Peterson's life. Each includes a few items that some would consider fodder for a tabloid—the kinds of "trivia" for which the Devlin and Naismith biography was criticized but which could be defended as honestly including the foibles of human nature. Much is left out. Trivia perhaps, but in Peterson's early years, jobs and travel were likely to leave lasting impressions. For example, a job teaching at a YMCA summer camp at Stoney Lake, Michigan, in 1929 was an early teaching position and also provided him with observations that led to his first publication in *The Auk* (Peterson 1929), yet the biographers have mentioned neither. We've learned a great deal about Peterson's personality and how he felt defined by and chained to his field guides, his insecurities, his fear of growing old and a measure of hypochondria, his interest in the opposite sex, a level of vanity, and how his interests changed over the years. All three biographies identify Peterson as an absentee father and a legendary bad driver, and all note his desire to be known for art other than field-guide art and his late obsession with bird photography, which provided an escape from the realities of his very busy life. All also note his positive view of conservation: he saw things as improving and met conservation challenges with a positive message.

These biographies neither individually nor collectively present a thorough assessment of Peterson's contributions to professional ornithology or, for that matter, to organized birding. Carlson makes no mention of the American Birding Association (ABA), though he refers to its journal, *Birding*, in relation to reviews of the fourth edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds*; Rosenthal mentions the ABA on one page. Devlin and Naismith comment several times on the ABA and on articles Peterson had written for *Birding*. Certainly Peterson, through his field guides, had generated the interest and the audience for the ABA. Is that it? He had no involvement with the ABA? In 1980, Peterson received the first ABA Ludlow Griscom Award for Outstanding Contributions to Regional Ornithology. In 2000, the ABA gave its first Roger Tory Peterson Award for Promoting the Cause of Birding, which is not mentioned in either of the recent biographies. Claudia Wilds (1994) wrote of the early history of the ABA and of Peterson's influence in *Birding*,

yet these biographies give little attention to Peterson's influence on organized birding as represented by the ABA.

In places, these biographies elevate Peterson's contributions to the level of "science," when in fact he was an eminent, eloquent, and effective spokesman for conservation, birds, and birding. Peterson was appreciated within the scientific community and contributed greatly, in his own way, to the advancement of scientific ornithology. This was acknowledged when John W. Fitzpatrick and John P. O'Neill (1986) named a new species of screech-owl after Peterson (*Otus petersoni*) in recognition "of his many lasting contributions to field ornithology, conservation, and wildlife art . . ." (p. 4). Peterson himself painted the new owl for the color plate that accompanied the description. Neither of the new biographies mentions this honor. Nor does either address what Peterson accomplished as Second Vice President (1960–1962), First Vice President (1962–1964), and President (1964–1966) of the Wilson Ornithological Society or as organizer and moderator for a symposium sponsored by the Wilson Ornithological Society in 1965 on the status of our birds of prey.

What influence did Peterson have on the AOU? He served on committees, was elected as a member of the AOU Council (1960–1961), and served as Second Vice President (1961–1962) and First Vice President (1962–1963). As a Fellow of the AOU, Peterson would have been asked to fill out a form for AOU archives providing details of his life and the things that influenced it. What did he have to say to the AOU? I think there is room for yet another biography, written by an ornithologist and focusing more on Peterson's interactions with and contributions to professional ornithology. As for the current biographies, all are well worth reading. Each is a slice of the history of the growth of birding, scientific ornithology, and conservation during the 20th century. Each includes a gold mine of information and insight on Peterson as well as his contemporaries in birding, conservation, and ornithology. Each is uniquely flavored by the insights and scholarship of its author(s), yet also, understandably, flawed by individual biases and weakness in science. A library that decides that only one biography is needed to tell the "Peterson story" will be making a mistake. Although the authors of the three biographies had access to most of the same resources and discuss many of the same contributions and events in Peterson's life, each has most often used different examples, interviews, and correspondence with different people. For yet another excellent, though abbreviated, perspective on Peterson and a totally different array of photos, see Kaufman (2008). Each of these biographies offers a fresh perspective on the very full and complex life of Roger Tory Peterson, who touched all who enjoy birds.—JEROME A. JACKSON, *Department of Marine and Ecological Sciences, Florida Gulf Coast University, Ft. Myers, Florida 33965, USA. E-mail: jjackson@fgcu.edu*

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