

Roger Tory Peterson 1908 - 1996

Roger Tory Peterson was born August 28, 1908 in Jamestown, New York. Upon the urging of his seventh grade teacher, he joined the Junior Audubon Club and discovered his enthusiasm of birds and nature. While spending time bird watching in the woods surrounding Jamestown, Roger began making field sketches to help identify each species. Bird identification and art soon became a passion. After graduating from high school, Peterson moved to New York City where he attended the Art Students League (1827-1928) and the National Academy of Design (1929-1931). As an instructor in science and art at the Rivers School in Brookline, Massachusetts, he shared his joy of bird watching with the next generation. Roger lectured extensively for the national Audubon Society and other organizations, reached millions of children and adults through his many articles and books.

Roger Tory Peterson's greatest contribution and impact is through the development and publication of practical field guidebooks. A Field Guide to the Birds was published in 1934 implementing an easy-to-use bird identification system and highlighted with his drawing of each species. This guidebook became a model for publication of numerous other nature field guides. Peterson's guide provided quick identification by grouping similar species together on one page and clearly designating important field marks. Peterson Field Guide series number over forty-five. The field guides, however, were only the best known of Peterson's achievements. For years he served as Art Director of National Wildlife Federation's conservation stamp program, traveled the country on National Audubon Society's film lecture circuit and was a board member of many conservation organizations.

Dr. Roger Tory Peterson received Honorary Doctorates from twenty-three different colleges and universities. He received many awards, including the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union (1944), the New York Zoological Society Gold Medal (1961), the World Wildlife Fund Gold Medal (1972), and Linne Gold Medal from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (1976), and the U.S. Medal of Freedom (1980). He was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his role in environmental awareness.

The Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History was built in Jamestown, NY to promote the work done by Dr. Peterson and educate the public about the importance of the natural world. The facility houses the lifetime body of work of Dr. Peterson. The Institute promotes nature study in the classroom, offers educational programs and workshop, and hosts wildlife art and photography exhibits.

In Connecticut, Dr. Peterson is best known for detecting the sharp reduction in osprey numbers at Great Island in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Through his work, osprey populations have returned to the island after devastating use of DDT in the area. A wildlife preserve in Lyme Connecticut was dedicated in his honor during the summer of 2000.

Dr. Peterson was finishing an article for Bird Watcher's Digest just a few hours before he died in July 1996. The Digest staff consider him the most important figure in nature study and conservation of the twentieth century.

Naturalist, artist, educator, photographer - - Roger Tory Peterson was all of these throughout his long life. He founded the environmental movement in North America by making nature accessible to everyone. He cared enough to teach what was most important to him - respecting the beauty and caring for this world and the natural order in which we live.