

Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography, by Douglas Carlson

Source: The Condor, 110(2) : 399-400

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/cond.2008.8590>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

The Condor 110(2):399–400
 © The Cooper Ornithological Society 2008

Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography.—Douglas Carlson. 2007. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 296 pp., 15 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 978-0-292-71680-3. \$24.95 (cloth).

Roger Tory Peterson was certainly one of the most influential, if not the most influential, artist-naturalists of the 20th century. Douglas Carlson has done a thorough job of researching Peterson's life. He received information from a number of Peterson's colleagues and friends, and had access to the Peterson papers at the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History in Jamestown, New York, including Peterson's autobiographical manuscript. Carlson highlights Peterson's many achievements but does not gloss over his difficulties, and discusses, for example, Peterson's isolation from his family resulting from his obsessive work habits, and his occasional bouts of depression. The result is a very readable account of Peterson's life and accomplishments, his successes, and his foibles.

The book is divided into eight sections, which are chronologically arranged, and 41 chapters. The chapters are untitled, oddly do not appear in the table of contents, and do not begin on new pages. The first section, covering the years 1908–1926, traces Peterson's early years in Jamestown, New York, his difficulties with his father, the people who influenced his developing interests in nature, and his early obsession with birds. The second section, 1926–1934, deals with Peterson's years in New York and Boston, his art school experiences, and his adventures with the Bronx County Bird Club. Also chronicled are his formative years as a teacher at various summer camps and at Rivers School in Massachusetts, and his first literary efforts that were published in *Bird-Lore*. The next section traces the development of his first field guide, *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1934, Houghton Mifflin, Boston), the publication of which vaulted Peterson into the public eye and started him on a long successful career in art, writing, and conservation. The section covering the years 1934–1942 chronicles Peterson's time with the National Audubon Society in New York City and his development as a teacher and conservationist. Also described are the disruptions of World War II, Peterson's induction into the military, and his first and second marriages. The 1942–1953 section describes Peterson's years in Washington, DC, and his landmark publication of *Birds Over America* (1948, Dodd, Mead & Co., New York), which established him as an important natural history writer. The section also contains a discussion of Peterson's disappointments with the National Audubon Society, his maturation as a bird photographer and painter, and his continued involvement in producing field guides. The 1954–1974 section traces Peterson's move to

Old Lyme, Connecticut, where he remained for the rest of his life. It also describes a 300-day trip around North America with ornithologist James Fisher, beginning in Newfoundland and ending in the Pribilof Islands off the coast of Alaska, and the resulting book, *Wild America* (1955, Houghton Mifflin, Boston). The next two sections, spanning the years 1974–1996, tell of Peterson's growing conservation activism, his many foreign travels, his constant work with field guides, and his continued maturation as a bird artist. The final section also tells of Peterson's hurt and anger at negative reviews of the fourth edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1980, Houghton Mifflin, Boston). The story ends with Peterson's death and a rather sad dispute over the disposition of Peterson's paintings, involving his widow's family and the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. Following the text, 16 pages of endnotes document the sources used in preparing the text. A Works Cited section includes 70 publications by Roger Tory Peterson and 76 by other authors. The index is comprehensive.

The book is well written, thoroughly researched, and has depth to its analysis. A major flaw, however, is the paucity of illustrations. The book has no color section and only 15 black-and-white photographs. In many places (e.g., Chapter 29) there are discussions of Peterson's painting style, including analysis of specific paintings, which would have benefited from their reproduction in color or, at the very least, in black-and-white. I think that a biography of a major artist that does not include reproductions of his major works is seriously deficient. The book also does not contain a complete bibliography of Peterson's published works, nor a complete list of books and articles that he illustrated—in my opinion, a missed opportunity. Carlson also, in places, confuses ornithology with other bird pursuits. For example on p. 75, in discussing young people at the National Audubon Society he states, "The list reads like a who's who in twentieth-century ornithology: Robert Allen, Carl Buchheister, Allan Cruickshank, Richard Pough, Alexander Sprunt, William Vogt, and Roger Tory Peterson." These men all did credible research on birds, but a who's who would certainly contain names like Alexander Wetmore, Ernst Mayr, and Charles Sibley. That being said, the text provides an engaging portrait of a complex and fascinating person who had a major impact on the development of birding, ornithology, and conservation. *Birds Over America* was the first bird book I ever read, and it was influential in my developing an interest in birds. The Peterson field guides were the only field guides available during my early years with birds, and certainly the publication in 1934 of *A Field Guide to the Birds* was a major event that was to have far-reaching consequences. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of ornithology, birding, or conservation. It is a good read.—WILLIAM E. DAVIS JR., Professor Emeritus, Boston University, 23 Knollwood Drive, East Falmouth, MA 02536. E-mail: wedavis@bu.edu