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IN MEMORIAM

Peter D. Vickery, 1949–2017

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Peter Douglas Vickery, 67, of Richmond, Maine, died at his home on February 28, 2017, after an 18-month battle with cancer. Peter's lifelong passion was birds, and they were woven on a daily basis into his adult life and his work. He was well known throughout Maine and farther afield for his knowledge of Maine's avifauna, and through his research and professional writings Peter contributed substantially to our knowledge of vulnerable grassland birds from New England to Argentina. He was a wonderful teacher whose enthusiasm for all things avian was disarming and infectious, especially to beginners. A member of the American Ornithologists' Union since 1985, Peter became an Elective Member in 2010.

Peter grew up in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he and his brother spent endless hours exploring the woods in search of living things of all kinds. In summer, the venue for these explorations switched to a boys' camp in coastal Maine. Peter attended George School, a Quaker school that instilled in him a lifelong commitment to the tenets of nonviolence. There, Peter's awareness of birds was first kindled when he helped his biology teacher band birds. Barbara Vickery, Peter's high-school sweetheart and wife of 47 years, recalls that her mother noticed Peter's focus on the birds at their feeder when he first started visiting Barbara's family home. When Peter and Barbara were about to embark on a cross-country adventure in the summer of 1971, Barbara's mother presented Peter with his first pair of binoculars and his first bird book, the classic "Golden Guide" by Chan Robbins et al. As the couple drove through the West, every time Peter saw what might possibly be a Golden Eagle, he stopped the car and leapt out. Each successive "eagle" turned out to be a red-tail, but Peter never lost hope. The hook had been set.

In 1972 Peter earned a B.A. in literature from Connecticut College. When he and Barbara moved to Maine a short time later, his passion for birds took off. He was so thrilled by the first visitation of Evening Grosbeaks to their house that he awakened a visiting houseguest to see them. He spent a long afternoon trying to chase down a Pileated Woodpecker drumming in the woods behind their house, never to find it—his first sighting would have to wait. New avian discoveries came thick and fast as he explored more of the state. He became aware of the importance of bird records early on, and over time he felt a deep responsibility to preserve these reports. He made a point of introducing himself to Ralph Palmer, author of the classic *Maine Birds*. Yet Peter was equally fascinated by, and appreciative of, the knowledge of lay observers such as Mark Libby, a Maine fisherman and avid birdwatcher. Davis Finch of New Hampshire became Peter's mentor—first by letter and eventually in person as they watched, in awe, the August phalarope-and-gull spectacle of Passamaquoddy Bay in easternmost Maine and chased rarities together. Peter initiated several Breeding Bird Survey routes. In a few years he had honed his field skills enough to become a leader on natural history tours for the



Peter Vickery at Morse Mountain, Phippsburg, Maine (Peter's favorite birding spot), circa 1997. Photo courtesy of Barbara St. John Vickery

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Massachusetts Audubon Society (Mass Audubon), initially in the United States and later internationally, ultimately covering all seven continents. During this period Peter's growing reputation in the birding community was tied to being the compiler of the seasonal northeastern syntheses for *American Birds* and author of more than 30 species accounts for *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*.

In the 1980s, Peter's growing knowledge of birds, innate curiosity about ecology, and concerns about conservation led him to explore the possibility of becoming a bona fide ornithologist by earning a graduate degree. In particular, he was interested in studying the effects of herbicide use on blueberry barrens and their unique avifauna, most notably Grasshopper Sparrows. Peter met with Malcolm Hunter at the University of Maine to discuss a thesis project, and within a matter of days he had written an ambitious proposal for a research program that ultimately led to M.S. and Ph.D. degrees, a Switzer Fellowship, and being honored with the University of Maine's Outstanding Wildlife Graduate Student Award in 1994. Balancing field research, formal classes, and guiding for Mass Audubon made the completion of Peter's graduate work a longer-than-usual undertaking, but it also provided an unusually deep and rich dataset compared to those of most thesis projects. More importantly, it opened the door to a series of grassland ecology and conservation projects that extended from New England to Florida to Argentina, efforts Peter pursued primarily as an avian ecologist in a new post for Mass Audubon under the aegis of the Center for Biological Conservation. Grassland birds were the primary focus of his work, but he also published papers on grassland flora and Lepidoptera. Among Peter's approximately 40 publications were coeditorship of *Ecology and Conservation of Grassland Birds of the Western Hemisphere* and *Grasslands of Northeastern North America: Ecology and Conservation of Native and Agricultural Landscapes* (Ornithological Monographs 64) as well as two accounts for *The Birds of North America* series, Grasshopper Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow. Three of his papers were widely cited because of their innovative thinking: He developed a new index of reproductive success to support the contention that breeding density may not be well correlated with nesting success; after documenting that grassland bird nests were suffering from heavy predation by striped skunks that were primarily foraging for insect larvae, he introduced the concept of "incidental predation"; and he was one of the first people to study area sensitivity of grassland birds, thereby exploring the mirror image of the dominant paradigm that focused on the habitat constraints of forest birds. Peter had adjunct professor status at the University of Massachusetts, which enabled him to advise graduate students, a role he found particularly rewarding.

Peter accumulated information on numerous birding sites while traveling around Maine. In 1978 he authored the *Annotated Checklist of Maine Birds*, and as his knowledge of the state expanded, he began drafting chapters for a statewide site guide. Unaware of Peter's efforts, Liz and Jan Pierson were working toward the same goal and put out a request to Maine birders for information and suggestions to update and expand their 1981 coastal site guide. One day, Peter called the Piersons to ask if he could stop by their house. He appeared carrying a box and offered its contents for their use, no strings attached. "It's all yours," he said. Inside were several hundred typed pages of detailed and nearly complete descriptions of birding sites around the state, compiled from Peter's efforts of more than a decade. It was a remarkably generous gesture, representing months of fieldwork and research that wouldn't need to be duplicated. This opened the door to a close relationship between the three that continued until Peter's death and ensured the success of the nascent book project, which the trio published in 1996 as *A Birder's Guide to Maine*.

Peter worked for Mass Audubon for 23 years, until 2001. Thereafter, he divided his time between biological consulting (with a special focus on the impact of alternative-energy development projects on birds); teaching avian ecology at the Hog Island Audubon Camp in Bremen, Maine; and writing his *Birds of Maine*, intended as the first systematic and thorough study of Maine's birdlife since Ralph Palmer's 1949 *Maine Birds*. Peter considered this effort, covering 450 species of birds that have occurred in Maine and documenting the many changes that have transpired since the middle of the last century, to be the culmination of his life's work. When he learned that he would be unlikely to complete the book himself because of his cancer diagnosis, he gathered a distinguished team of coauthors to see it through to publication and persuaded world-renowned bird artist Lars Jonsson to provide paintings. The team's efforts continue apace today, and the project will be completed in a timely fashion.

As Scott Weidensaul, a friend and colleague whom Peter recruited to be managing editor of *Birds of Maine*, noted, "Every email, every phone call, was an occasion for Peter to share something lovely and wild he'd seen—the rich late-afternoon light at Maine's Seawall Beach on a walk with Barbara, Bohemian waxwings in the yard, the first bird song at the end of winter, or a peregrine over Scarborough Marsh snatching a Bonaparte's gull from the air 'like picking an apple.'" Over the 18 months that he was ill, Peter exhibited a spirit and optimism that both inspired and sustained those who loved him. As recently as a week before his death, he was making plans to visit the seabird colony at Matinicus Rock. His love of birds never waned, even when it required a brief nap on the deck during a

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pelagic trip or a snooze in the car as a friend drove him home.

Peter is survived by his wife of 47 years, Barbara St. John Vickery; by their sons, Gabriel and Simon; and by numerous other family members and a wide circle of friends, colleagues, and students. Peter requested that any memorial donations be made to the Birds of Maine Book Fund, Camden National Bank, 111 Main St., Richmond, ME 04357, to be directed toward book design and artwork costs.

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, ted020@centurytel.net

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