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## Completing a Legacy

Baton Rouge artist helps finish famous bird guide

When the most famous bird artist of modern times couldn't finish his final masterpiece, a Baton Rouge man helped bring the work to completion.

The famous bird artist was Roger Tory Peterson, who was working on the final art for a new edition of his "Field Guide to the Birds" on the day he died at age 87. The Baton Rouge man who finished Peterson's art work is H. Douglas Pratt, an LSU ornithologist who's acclaimed as a bird artist in his own right.

Both Peterson's unfinished art and Pratt's completed version are included in the fifth edition of "A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America," which recently arrived in bookstores across the country.

"I don't know why they picked me to do this," Pratt said. "It's a great honor. He (Peterson) must have thought my work was up to snuff."

Peterson, who spent the final years of his life at his woodland home in Old Lyme, Conn., revolutionized bird-watching in 1934 with the publication of his first "Field Guide to the Birds." It used simple language, and it clearly indicated common identifying marks so that amateur birders could understand what he was talking about. The book went on to sell millions of copies in several editions, and it's credited with helping to make bird-watching a popular national pastime.

Peterson's publisher, Houghton Mifflin, used his famous "Peterson Identification System" for a series of nature guides that would eventually number about 50 titles. Though Peterson's system was employed in identifying everything from sea shells to rattlesnakes, the centerpiece of the series remained his "Field Guide to the Birds."

In the last years of his life, as his age advanced and his health declined, Peterson undertook a fifth and final edition of his bird guide. Because of his frail condition, he once wondered aloud what would happen if he couldn't finish it, his widow, Virginia Peterson, tells readers in a preface to the new edition.

"Believing that he would live to be 100 years old, I said, 'Roger, don't worry -- it will get done,'" Virginia Peterson writes.

On July 28, 1996, Roger Tory Peterson was working on the final color plate for the fifth edition, a grouping of accidental flycatchers.

"He walked from his studio to the house to lie down for a while, and that was it. He never got back up," said Noble Proctor, a family friend and fellow ornithologist.

After Peterson's death, Virginia remembered her promise to him that the fifth edition would be completed. At her request, Proctor came on board to finish the text. But there was still the question about what to do with Peterson's unfinished bird plate.

Eventually, Proctor and Virginia Peterson decided to include the unfinished plate in the new edition as a tribute to her husband's work.

"We felt that once we decided to put the unfinished plate in the book, that it would be good to let people see what the finished plate would look like," Proctor said. "We immediately thought of Doug, and we pulled out some of the bird books that Doug had done. I had known Doug for a long time, as did Dr. Peterson, because he is an excellent artist."

Pratt's credentials spoke for themselves. A staff research associate at LSU's Museum of Natural Science, Pratt got his first big break as a nature artist when he volunteered to illustrate the late George H. Lowery Jr.'s landmark 1974 work, "The Mammals of Louisiana and Its Adjacent Waters."

"I always tell people that I learned to paint birds by painting animals," Pratt recalled. After his collaboration with Lowery, Pratt provided illustrations of birds and mammals for Encyclopedia Britannica, then produced one-fourth of the illustrations in the National Geographic Society's "Field Guide to the Birds of North America." Pratt's 1987 book, "Field Guide to the Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific," a collaboration with P.L. Bruner and D.G. Berrett, earned a public thumbs-up from Peterson himself.

In a preface to the third edition of his "Field Guide to Western Birds," Peterson said that he felt comfortable in omitting a study of Hawaiian birds in his guide because it was already so well covered by Pratt's guide and another book, "Hawaii's Birds."

"I considered that another papal benediction," said Pratt, smiling.

Pratt's first words of approval from Peterson had come in the mid-1970s, when Pratt and fellow LSU ornithologist John P. O'Neill met with the celebrated bird artist during a road trip.

Pratt and O'Neill were on a tour of the Eastern seaboard during which O'Neill had arranged to meet the country's best bird artists, including Peterson, John Henry Dick, Arthur Singer, Don Eckelberry and Al Gilbert. Pratt recalled that O'Neill was assured an audience with the artists because he had discovered a new bird, the orange-throated tanager. O'Neill, who's also a staff research associate at LSU's Museum of Natural Science, has identified 13 previously unknown birds during a distinguished career that also includes work as a bird artist. "I've painted all my life, too," said the 60-year-old O'Neill, whose specialty is the birds of Peru.

Both Pratt and O'Neill received encouragement from the professional mentors they encountered on their tour. Pratt didn't think of himself as a close friend of Peterson, though the relatively small social circle of bird artists occasionally brought them in contact. During a meeting of the American Birding Association in Vancouver, Pratt went on a field trip with Peterson and his wife.

"We were able to identify a blue grouse together," Pratt recalled. "In person, he was a shy man, but not in a way that was crippling. He was likable -- the kind of person that everyone would like."

For Pratt, the field trip was a chance to connect with a man he'd first encountered as a boy in North Carolina -- in the pages of Peterson's field guide. "I grew up on Peterson, so I like the book, if for no other reason than sentimental ones," the 57-year-old Pratt said.

Despite his past associations with Peterson, Pratt was surprised when his widow phoned and asked him to complete Peterson's final bird plate.

Pratt, a self-described night owl who often works into the wee hours and sleeps late, was dozing when the call came.

"She called me one morning and woke me up," Pratt recalled. "She asked if I would do this, and of course, I said yes. She sent a photograph of the unfinished plate."

Virginia Peterson said that her husband had delayed finishing his final color plate for months as he tried to get more information on the La Sagra's Flycatcher. To complete the plate, Pratt painted the La Sagra's Flycatcher, the Cuban Peewee, Variegated Flycatcher and Loggerhead Kingbird. The additional flycatchers in the finished plate were borrowed from Peterson's "Field Guide to Mexican Birds."

Sitting at the drafting board of his home studio in the Kenilworth area, Pratt often refers to dead bird specimens borrowed from LSU's massive collection as he completes his paintings. Though he also uses photographs and personal insights he's gleaned from bird-watching, Pratt counts the bird corpses -- known by ornithologists as "bird skins" -- as an invaluable tool.

He ranked the collection as "easily the best in the South, one of the best in the United States, and for tropical birds, easily the best in the world."

The flycatcher assignment for the Peterson guide was fairly simple, the artist said.

"It didn't take too long to finish. They were relatively easy birds to paint," Pratt said.

As a gesture of gratitude for completing the color plate, Peterson's widow sent Pratt a mammoth, two-volume compilation of Peterson's art.

Like her husband, Virginia Peterson didn't live to see the fifth edition of "A Field Guide to the Birds" released to the public. She died April 15, 2001, at age 75.

Lisa White, a Houghton Mifflin editor who works with the Peterson field guide series, remembered Virginia Peterson as a fan of Pratt's art.

"She was very pleased with the work he did," White said. "She called it Petersonesque."

"His use of color is just incredible," O'Neill said of Pratt's work. "His paintings are very bright and very bold. His use of plants with his birds is also spectacular."

"He makes the birds real," Proctor said of Pratt's paintings. "That was a quality that Dr. Peterson also had. They're realistic. We get a feeling for what the birds actually look like in the wild. They have life in them."

Proctor said he's satisfied with how the fifth edition turned out.

"It was important to us, that if Dr. Peterson was willing to spend the last day of his life working on it, then we should finish it," Proctor said. "We're happy with it, and we hope Dr. Peterson would be happy with it, too."