Available in bookshops across the country, Roger Tory Peterson’s field guides for birds are as ubiquitous now as they were revolutionary when first published in 1934. But what seemed revolutionary at the time was really evolutionary, the product of nearly fifty years of refinement by a variety of birdwatchers who all had the same goal—making bird identification by sight as easy as possible.

INVENTING THE BIRDWATCHING FIELD GUIDE

We are all so used to peering through binoculars at a bird in a treetop and thumbing through a book to see what it is that we never ask where that handy guide came from. If asked, most people would bring up Roger Tory Peterson, but although he made the modern guide, he built on a set of experiments that go back to birdwatching’s beginnings in the late nineteenth century. A good place to start looking at bird books is the California countryside just north of San Diego in 1889, where on any May morning we would find a respectable young Victorian lady, Florence Merriam, recovering from a respectable Victorian affliction of the “nerves” by retreating from the hustle and bustle of society to the quiet of nature, in this case her Uncle Gustavus’s ranch. There, “armed with opera-glass and notebook, and Ridgway’s Manual to turn to in all my perplexities,” she tried to identify all the birds she saw.1 The sister of naturalist C. Hart Merriam (who headed the federal Bureau of Biological Survey), this early birdwatcher had excellent preparation for the task—she had already written the first book about identifying birds by sight, *Birds through an Opera-Glass* (and what does that title say about early birdwatchers?)—but in the end confessed to failure. “The fact of the matter is, you can identify perhaps ninety percent of the birds you see, with an opera-glass and patience; but when it comes to the other ten percent, including small vireos and flycatchers,” you will be stumped, “for it is impossible to...name all the birds without a gun.”2

The pictures here show some of the steps that led to a book that helped people to do just that. The first two come from the ornithology texts Merriam’s generation wrestled with, three more from her early efforts, *Birds through an Opera-Glass* (1889)

BY THOMAS R. DUNLAP
and *Birds of Village and Field* (1898), another set from experiments with illustrating guides with photographs, and finally pages from early guides that pointed toward the modern form. These look crude to the modern reader, but the early books made birdwatching attractive enough that in 1934 Houghton Mifflin found a strong market, even at the depths of the Depression and at a cost of $2.75, for Peterson’s “bird book on a new plan,” the forerunner of the shelf of nature guides down at Barnes and Noble and Borders Books.3

The field guide authors were typically genteel women (birding grew within the women’s reform movement) or naturalists, with a couple of nature book writers. Florence Merriam and Mabel Osgood Wright combined the first two categories. Merriam came from a respectable family, married a naturalist (Vernon Bailey), and wrote everywhere from field guides to technical studies, becoming in 1885 the American Ornithological Union’s first female associate member and later a full member. Wright, from an established New England family, married a rare-book dealer who shared her interest in nature. She had a long career as a writer and photographer, founded Connecticut Audubon, established Birdcraft Sanctuary near her home, and became an associate member of the AOU in 1895.4 Neltje Blanchan married Frank Doubleday, a book publisher, who like Wright’s husband encouraged her writing, and she produced a series of books, mainly for children.5 Frank Chapman, the son of a New York lawyer, had a job at a bank but spent his lunch hours at a taxidermy shop and his time on the commuter train reading Coues’s *Key to North American Birds* before, in 1885, finding a position at the American Museum of Natural History, where he remained until he retired in 1942. Besides writing several guides and books on New York City’s birds, he arranged the first meeting of the New York Audubon Society, sat on Audubon’s national board, and founded and for thirty-five years edited its journal, *Bird-Lore* (now Audubon).6 Ralph Hoffman had social credentials and a naturalist’s interests but not the naturalist’s job. A Harvard man when that was more a social than an academic credential, he taught at private schools. Charles Reed was a bird artist and nature writer who, with his father, published a series of nature books for children and school use in the early 1900s. John Grant, alas, left little record beyond his book.

Collecting old field guides, besides allowing birders to collect something besides lists, gives a window onto earlier generations of Americans’ encounters with nature. They show how names changed and birds spread or vanished, how the birdwatching community learned to tell the birds apart, and how times and places changed, too. In the 1890s, for instance, what is now the Northern Flicker had about a hundred local names, the most popular being High-hole and Yellow-hammer; the Vesper Sparrow was also Grass Finch and Bay-winged Bunting; the Baltimore Oriole was the Fire-bird, Golden Robin, or Hang-nest; and the Chipping Sparrow the Chip-bird, Chippy, Hair-bird, Chipping Sparrow, or Social Sparrow. (“Hair-bird” came from its using horsehair for its nests, and the name declined as Henry Ford’s fortune rose.) Besides the many field guides, collectors can seek out Audubon pamphlets, children’s books, and local guides, books like Ludlow Griscom’s *Birds of the New York City Region* (1923), which described a city where Bald Eagles were “often seen from the 125th Street Ferry.” Begin with the names given here and go on—and happy book hunting.

**ONE**

When Florence Merriam turned to “Ridgway”—formally, Robert Ridgway’s *Manual of North American Birds*—here is what she found. Clearly, using it required persistence and some knowledge of scientific terms, and it was not a field book, for the 631 text pages followed by 124 plates of line drawings of bird beaks, heads, feet, wings, tails, and other parts weighed in at four pounds. Perhaps Merriam called her book about her season on the ranch *A-Birding on a Bronco* because she packed the book on her horse.
The other authoritative text of the period, Elliott Coues's *Key to North American Birds*, gave the bird-watcher no more help. This page, showing the robin, had at least a picture of the head, but the Latin name came first, technical terms littered the description, and Coues, no more than Ridgway, did not consider things you saw in the field that marked off the robin from other birds. He had a section on "field ornithology," which Ridgway did not, but that meant not identifying birds in the field but getting them out of the field and into the collection—for which Coues recommended a double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun. No, ornithology books would not serve the new hobby.

Merriam's *Birds through an Opera-Glass* aimed at a different kind of collecting. It hardly seems like a bird guide, with its chatty prose, descriptions of birds as people, and illustrations that only decorated the text, but it told women they could identify birds, introduced them to some common ones, and certainly created enthusiasm. One naturalist wrote a friend in 1904 that "These are great migration times...the parks are full of birds...and people shooting them with opera glasses."
FOUR

This page, from Merriam’s *Birds of Village and Field*, followed a format from nineteenth-century natural history: names and technical description in small type, followed by stories in a larger font. It would not meet modern standards, but with the English name first, description and range at the top of the page, and an illustration of the head that showed the plumage pattern, it certainly beat Ridgway.

FIVE

This, also from Merriam’s *Birds of Village and Field* (below), looks even more useful, and birding readers should compare it with the same spread in Chandler Robbins’s *Birds of North America* (Golden Press, 2001, pages 268–69). The wood engravings Merriam and others relied on were the standard inexpensive method for illustrations, popular with the newspapers from the Civil War until the 1880s, when photo-reproductions displaced them, but used in natural history even after that.
SIX

Mabel Osgood Wright’s Birdcraft (above) used photoreproductions of fine art, images from Audubon and other bird artists reduced and arranged on fifteen color plates showing the 166 species she discussed. Even a high-end production like this could not afford more plates, for color printing required different paper, inks, and press than the text, and then the pages had to be inserted in the right place, which meant more hand labor and quality control. Like field guide writers ever since, she complained about the quality, saying she had had “some of the most nasty colors done in halftones” and still “the Wrens look as if they had taken a bath in ginger tea, and the female tanager was wrongly marked.”7 The plate here gave a good idea of what the woodpeckers looked like, but many birds were not so clearly marked or the artist not so obliging as Audubon. Birdwatchers needed a different kind of picture.

SEVEN

Since cameras and film could not be counted on for good pictures of live birds, Neltje Blanchan used stuffed and mounted ones for the fifty plates in Bird Neighbors—like Wright’s, a library-size volume for the home—putting them in front of out-of-focus backgrounds. That gave a certain air of the outdoors, but the Red-winged Blackbird looked as black as a polished shoe and it stood on one foot—not a very lifelike pose. These pictures helped birdwatchers but were hardly ideal.
EIGHT

In *Our Common Birds and How to Know Them*, John B. Grant introduced ninety species found around the home and in city parks, and for sixty-four included a photo of a mounted specimen. These cost less than Blanchan’s pictures, but this one looked like any other sparrow—small, brown, and streaked—and there was no way to tell what marked the Song Sparrow off from the others. Still, it worked. Ludlow Griscom received a copy of Grant’s book and a pair of three-power field glasses for his sixth birthday in 1896 and went on to become the dean of American birdwatchers. Roger Tory Peterson, recalling birding with enthusiasts from the Bronx in the late 1920s, said that Griscom was “our God, and his *Birds of the New York City Region* our Bible.”

NINE

Chester Reed’s little books dominated the market before Peterson’s came along because they gave birdwatchers a portable catalog of the birds of their region, with names, a picture (photoreproduction of one of Reed’s oil portraits), and some idea of range and season. At 5½ by 3½ inches and with rounded corners, they fit easily into shirt pockets. In 1906 the cloth-bound volumes, for the field, sold for fifty cents apiece, and the leather-bound ones, to be used in the study, for seventy-five cents. The Audubon Society distributed them to Junior Audubon clubs in public schools, and in the seventh grade, in Miss Hornbeck’s Junior Audubon club, Roger Peterson got one—his first field guide.
Ralph Hoffman’s Guide to the Birds of New England and Eastern New York (left) looked, at a glance, like Merriam’s Birds of Village and Field, but instead of stories, he gave the information birdwatchers needed in a standard form, including not just obvious plumage patterns—in italics—but range, habitat, song, and behavior. Reading this entry, you can follow the mental sorting process birdwatchers used to go from a bird in the bush to a name in the book.

Frank Chapman’s Color Key to North American Birds (1903, above) did more for birdwatchers. It gave only information that aided identification, put text and picture together (something that became standard only with Chandler Robbins’s Birds of North America in 1966), grouped similar species, and had pictures specifically made to help the student “in identifying birds in their haunts by giving, in color, those markings which most quickly catch the eye. They do not pretend to be perfect representations...but aim to present a bird’s characteristic colors as they appear when seen at a distance.” Here we see something like Peterson’s diagrammatic pictures and telegraphic prose.

NOTES
3. “The plan” was the use of arrows on the drawings to call attention to a species’ distinguishing characteristics. The phrase appeared on the dust jacket of his first book, Field Guide to the Birds (1934).

Forest Aesthetics, translated from the 1902 German text by Heinrich von Salisch, provides a window into the origins of forestry and landscape design. With its publication, von Salisch became the central promoter of aesthetics and forest health in an era of economic forestry and clearcutting.

Foresters will marvel at the similarities of problems and situations between Central European forestry of the late 19th century and late 20th-century American forestry. Landscape management and design students and professionals will get an insight into the development of their art through von Salisch’s frequent references to landscape artists like William Gilpin, Prince von Pueckler-Muskau, and others of that period. But mostly, any student, teacher, landowner, or land manager interested in natural resources management will find jewels of forest history in the author’s philosophy and practical applications.

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