



Reading Nature *Tom Murphy*

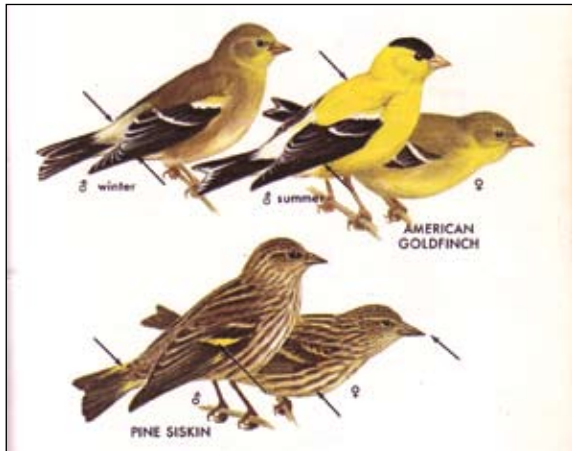
Master of the Natural

Review of *Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson* by Elizabeth J. Rosenthal. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2008.

During the winter this year, we noticed many goldfinches with dulled winter plumage at our feeders. At least that's what we thought. Then we overheard someone talking about how many pine siskins she had seen this winter and that they were hard to tell from goldfinches. We consulted our field guides and looked carefully at the crowd around the feeder. Much to our surprise, we discovered they were almost all pine siskins.

It was easy to tell the difference between the two species because our field guides were modeled on Roger Tory Peterson's system that puts similar birds together in similar poses and highlights the distinguishing differences with arrows. Though the pine siskin's stripes look obvious in the drawing, they can be more subtle on the actual birds (as they were on ours). The guide points to the breast, and that was where the stripes were most obvious on the birds. Ironically, it also noted that the goldfinch has white on its wing and tail, while the pine siskin has goldfinch-colored yellow. Once the guides taught us to see the differences between the two birds, it seemed hard to believe we had confused them.

Before Peterson created his *Field Guide to the Birds*, first



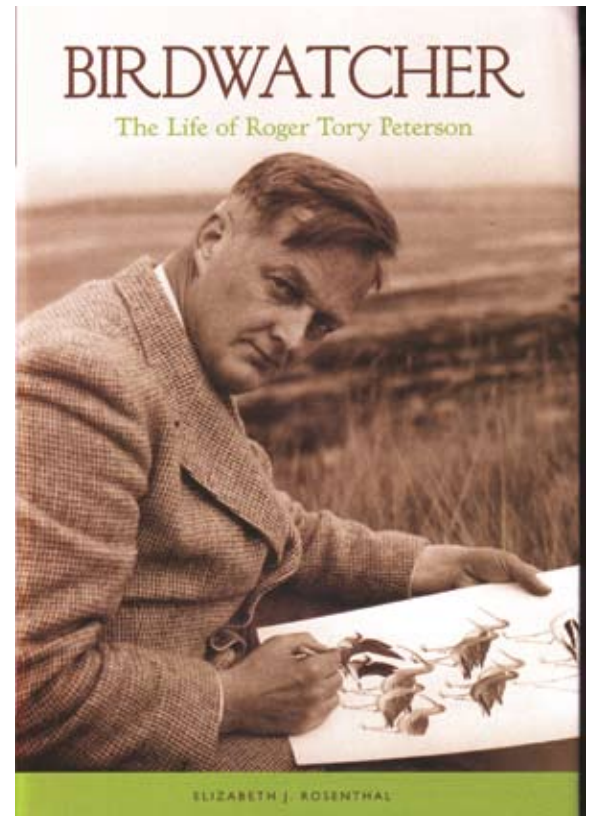
Above: Peterson's guides revolutionized bird identification by showing birds in simplified environments facing the same way and highlighting distinguishing characteristics with arrows.

published in 1934, books used for bird identification were not nearly so helpful. The descriptions were more scientific than readable, and Peterson had to rethink what kind of book was needed to broaden the audience that enjoyed the identification and study of birds. Elizabeth Rosenthal's biography *Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson* places that accomplishment in the context of Peterson's life and in its historical context.

Rosenthal's biography begins chronologically, but once Peterson matures and has established himself through his field guide, his work with the Audubon Society, and other organizations, the book becomes more thematic, tracing an aspect of his life across the years, though the themes are arranged so those important earlier in his life appear first. She tells of how eleven-year-old Roger Peterson became interested in birds in Jamestown, New York; how after high school he earned enough money decorating Chinese lacquer cabinets for a stint in New York City at the Art Students League; and how he became the naturalist at an exclusive boys' camp in Maine, all the while making the personal connections that would be important to him his whole life.

What is intriguing about Peterson is that he combines so many talents. His artistic ability alone—his ability to capture what is essential about a particular species of bird in a drawing—would probably have made him successful. But he also revolutionized the approach to all field guides, not just birding ones, and wrote well and extensively on nature and conservation issues.

Those issues form many of the themes in the book. Thus Peterson's concern for the osprey near his home in Old Lyme, Connecticut, is presented in the context of the DDT controversy. While in the army during World War II, Peterson participated in a test of the impact of DDT on birds after a light application, a test that showed no impact. But in 1964, when he testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee, he noted that then the researchers were unaware of how DDT accumulated in the food chain so that a robin, unaffected by the spraying, which ate ten worms that had ingested leaf mold containing DDT would die months after the spraying.



Long before this testimony, Peterson had concluded that the decline in osprey reproduction rates was due to chemicals. He used his reputation and influence to call attention to and obtain funding to study declining bird populations. He was an outspoken supporter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and was often frustrated by the timidity of some of his long-time associates in speaking out against the chemical industry and its attacks on her arguments. Rosenthal describes the pressure placed on academic ornithologists by their universities, which depended on the agro-chemical companies to fund their agriculture departments.

Peterson had idiosyncrasies and the peculiar combination of generosity and ego that seems to accompany those who rely on their talent and ultimately end up working without an institutional net, who face the world directly and find their place in it as unique individuals. The DDT controversy was only one example of the importance of independent voices in the study of the natural world, especially someone like Peterson whose goal seemed to be to empower others to understand the natural world better.

Tom Murphy teaches nature writing at Mansfield University. You can contact him at readingnature@mountainhomemag.com.

AS LOW AS **1.99% APR** OR UP TO **\$1000 IN REBATES*** ON SELECT POLARIS VEHICLES

X-TREME PERFORMANCE. X-TREME DEALS.

POLARIS XPEVENT.COM

CANYON MOTORSPORTS
 RT 6 1/2 MILE W. OF GAINES 5 MILES E. OF GALETON
 814-435-2878
 Hours: Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri, 9-7; Sat, 9-2; Closed Wed. & Sun.

From Now Until April 30
 choose ONE of the following X-Tremes:

X-TREME FINANCING OFFER
 -OR-
X-TREME REBATE OFFER
 -OR-
X-TREME COMBINATION OFFER

See dealer for details

Ackley & Son

- Lowest prices in the Twin Tiers on: Carhartt, Woolrich, Columbia.
- New selections for men, women, & children.
- 35% below department and chain stores.

LARGEST CARHARTT SELECTION IN AREA

311 West Main Street
 Westfield, PA 16950
 814-367-2732
 Monday - Thursday 8-6
 Friday 8-8
 Saturday 8-5
 Sunday 10-3 (Oct-Dec)