

IN MEMORIAM: JOHN M. C. PETERSON

John Thaxton

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It seems profoundly appropriate that as Pat and I birded along Cemetery Lane first thing this morning, walking slowly through a field of ankle-high, dew-drenched grasses splattered with cadmium yellow dandelions, and smiling widely at the unexpected songs of a Bobolink, that I should start composing in my mind a eulogy for Mike Peterson, an extremely dear friend and mentor.

As soon as we had our vacation house in Keene I called the Nature Conservancy to ask if anyone knew of a good hawk watching location in the area, and they gave me Mike's phone number. We immediately hit it off with Mike and started getting together with him every time we came to the Adirondacks, and before we knew what hit us we did a Christmas Bird Count on a bone-chilling, rainy day, and a waterfowl count on a sub-zero morning with twenty mile per hour winds in our faces. I remember Mike standing on the railroad tracks opposite Wickham Marsh, scanning a large flock of goldeneye and saying, his eyes pressed to his binoculars, "Please, Lord, don't bring me back as a duck."

Mike had a world-class sense of humor, and I remember like yesterday helping him from his daughter's car to his seat at the Crown Point bird banding station only to realize it had started to rain lightly. I dashed over to my car, grabbed the golf umbrella someone had given me but I had never used, dashed back to Mike, opened the umbrella and got lifted a few inches off my feet by a gust of wind. Mike roared so much with laughter he couldn't even speak for quite a while, and when I finally got the umbrella positioned over him I realized he had rain drops on his glasses and tears of laughter running down his cheeks.

Mike made an absolutely enormous contribution to Adirondack birding, not only in terms of his relentless field work and educational outreaches but also with regard to his editing projects and his published writings. After graduating Hobart and William Smith College, Mike served as a navy pilot for four years and then became Assistant Professor of Literature at Rochester Institute of Technology. He then taught English at Moriah Central School in Port Henry and befriended Greenleaf Chase (Greenie) and Geoffrey Carlton, two extraordinary birders and naturalists.

Mike co-founded High Peaks Audubon Society, Inc. in 1978, serving as its president for numerous terms and editing its newsletter for twenty-five years. He talked Pat and me into joining HPAS a few weeks after we met him, and within six months of knowing him we got home from climbing our forty-sixth high peak and found a letter from Mike asking us to join the board. Twenty-five years later we still sit on the board and I've been the newsletter editor for eleven years.

From 1980 to 1985 Mike served as the Region 7 Coordinator of *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, published by Cornell University Press and

from 2000 to 2005 he served as the Region 7 Coordinator of *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, a project undertaken by the New York State Ornithological Association, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, New York Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit, Cornell University Department of Natural Resources, Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon New York. Mike wrote 38 species accounts for the first atlas, and for the second he served as a peer reviewer and wrote 12 species accounts.

The morning Mike found out that the second atlas was a go he called and said, “Boy oh boy am I glad you two are still backpacking and climbing High Peaks because I got some doozies for you.”

In addition to writing for the atlases Mike wrote numerous articles for NYSOA’s *Kingbird* journal, including two that won the John J. Elliot best *Kingbird* article of the year award— “First Record of Palm Warbler Nesting in New York State” (1985) and “A Common Yellowthroat Exhibiting Male and Female Plumage (Bilateral Gynandromorphy) in Essex County, NY.” I remember meeting Manny Levine, then editor of *The Kingbird*, at a NYSOA annual meeting and him saying, “Gynandromorphy? I had no idea what it meant.”

At that same NYSOA annual meeting, Mike received a special award for writing a record-setting number of *Kingbird* Regional reports, which he wrote for 26½ years. With his good friend, Gary Lee, Mike co-wrote *Adirondack Birding: 60 Great Places to Find Birds*.

One of Mike’s favorite projects, and one that he talked us into participating in, involved managing Four Brothers Islands on Lake Champlain, which involved catching and banding 1,000 Ring-billed Gulls and whatever other birds we could catch. Mike started the Crown Point Bird Banding Station and ran it for over 40 years; it hosted everyone from thousands of school children to prisoners from Moriah Shock Incarceration Facility. Over the course of his tenure at Crown Point Mike banded more than 73,000 birds, and each time I watched him band one his facial expression seemed one of never ending, childish wonder. He communicated that wonder to thousands of children and adults.

He passed away four days before the banding station opened this year.

Editor’s Note: This remembrance was republished with permission from the June-August 2017 issue of the newsletter of Northern New York Audubon.