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## Review of *Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography* by Douglas Carlson

Laura Erickson

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## Book Reviews

### ROGER TORY PETERSON: THE MAN THROUGH HIS WORK

*Roger Tory Peterson: A Biography.* Douglas Carlson. 2007. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 296 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover).

August 28, 2008, marks the centennial of Roger Tory Peterson's birth, and books related to the most prominent naturalist of the twentieth century have been sprouting up everywhere. I was disappointed that Douglas Carlson shied away from examining Peterson's personal life to provide insights into the forces and relationships that shaped, and were shaped by, this man so consumed with birds. Instead, Carlson focuses almost entirely on Peterson's work, writing, "Because his death is so recent, there are many who have a personal investment in his story; beyond a request for an interview, no attempts have been made to invade the privacy of any of them. Through Peterson's painting and writing, and in the work of the Roger Tory Peterson Institute, the truths of his life are revealed."

The book might more appropriately have been titled *Roger Tory Peterson: The Man through His Work*, and within this context Carlson does an admirable job, examining in great detail specific examples of both Peterson's writing and his artwork, and tracing Peterson's evolution from artist, educator, and naturalist to activist. Carlson notes with regard to the fight to ban DDT that Peterson wrote to a friend in 1962, "We have got to be far more militant, and I am afraid that biologists as a whole have got to be a bit more aggressive from now on." In April 1964, the month Rachel Carson died, Peterson testified before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Government Operations, recommending that "Aldrin, endrin, dieldrin and all compounds of the chlorinated hydrocarbon complex be banned. Permits to manufacture them should be withdrawn." In the intervening years until DDT was banned in 1972, Peterson waged a tireless campaign to educate the public and government officials about the issue, and for years afterward continued to collect data about the long-term effect of the ban on his beloved local ospreys.

Carlson writes that Peterson "never set out to become the most significant naturalist of his time," but the details of his life belie that. After the full-color Golden field guide by Chandler Robbins and others was published in 1966 to wide praise, Peterson set to work on all-new Eastern and Western editions of his guide in full color. When a new generation of sophisticated birders wrote less-than-glowing reviews of this new guide, Peterson literally went back to the drawing board and started laboring on yet another edition—a depleting and ultimately thankless task that consumed him, preventing him from finishing other more enjoyable and, perhaps, more important writing, artistic, and conservation projects.

This fifth and final edition of his field guide was not quite finished at his death in 1996, and was published posthumously.

Despite his competitiveness and an ego to match his abilities, Peterson was generous with his knowledge and time, as I can personally attest—he wrote a detailed response to a question I sent him back in the late 1980's, when he was being bombarded from all sides with such trivial, as well as far more important, requests. Douglas Carlson's close examination of his huge body of written, photographic, and artistic work makes the book a worthwhile entry in the library of books about this interesting man who sparked a widespread and enduring interest in birds and nature study.—*Laura Erickson, Ithaca, NY 14850.*