

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Nebraska Bird Review

Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

---

6-2006

## A Book-collector's Guide to Roger Tory Peterson

Paul A. Johnsgard

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebbirdrev>



Part of the [Poultry or Avian Science Commons](#), and the [Zoology Commons](#)

---

Johnsgard, Paul A., "A Book-collector's Guide to Roger Tory Peterson" (2006). *Nebraska Bird Review*. 287.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebbirdrev/287>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nebraska Bird Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## A Book-collector's Guide to Roger Tory Peterson

Paul A. Johnsgard  
School of Biological Sciences  
University of Nebraska -- Lincoln 68588  
[pjohnsga@unlserve.unl.edu](mailto:pjohnsga@unlserve.unl.edu)

One of the major disappointments of my youth was that I grew up without access to a real field guide to birds. My early years were spent in a small North Dakota village that lacked a library, and my only reference book on birds was a badly-tattered copy of a badly-illustrated 1912 book that my mother had grown up with, Chester A. Reed's *Birds of Eastern North America*. However, in 1939 a very kind aunt gave me a still-cherished copy of the Macmillan edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* as a Christmas present. With its hundreds of wonderful color plates, I finally had a way of identifying many previously unrecognized birds. But as I was soon to discover, a bird artist and author by the name of Roger Tory Peterson was about to revolutionize the field guide world. I suspect that many of today's birders were first introduced to birds and birding by a Peterson guide, so I thought that a summary of Peterson's products might be of interest.

Although the first edition of Roger Tory Peterson's landmark book, *A Field Guide to the Birds, Giving Field Marks of all Species Found in Eastern North America* had been published in 1934, only three years after my birth, I didn't learn of its existence until I went away to college in the early 1950's. By that time Peterson's eastern guide was already available in a third edition (having first been revised in 1939, and again in 1947). During the 1950's I bought almost every new Peterson field guide as soon as I learned of its availability, including Peterson's western companion volume, *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. This book had been published in 1941, the first printing having a distinctive "1941" appearing on the title page, and the dust jacket (illustrated with woodpeckers and quails) has a \$2.75 price tag. This title was still in its first edition during the 1950's, but by then the price had been raised to \$3.75, and a more colorful jacket design of buntings and woodpeckers had been adopted.

During this same period, Peterson, Guy Mountfort and P.A.D. Hollom collaborated to produce *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. It was printed in London by Collins in 1954, and priced in the U.S. at \$5.00. Swedish, Dutch, German and Swiss (in French) versions also appeared at about the same time. There were thirteen printings of the first English-language edition before a revised edition was published in 1966. A third edition appeared in 1974, and a fourth in 1983. By the printing of the fourth edition, almost a million copies had been sold. Nearly a dozen foreign-language editions of this work have been published---their details would be a fit topic for some ornithological bibliophile to sort out.

With the financial support of the Texas Game and Fish Commission, Peterson's only single-state guide, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas*, was published in 1960. The first printing is so identified on the copyright page, and the book could be obtained only directly from the Texas Commission, for \$3.00 postpaid. It was revised in 1963 and distributed thereafter by Houghton Mifflin. It was most recently reprinted in 1999, and has a current retail price of \$22.00.

A much-anticipated second edition of Peterson's western field guide finally appeared in 1961, having a price of \$4.95, and with new paintings and the Hawaiian Islands species added. The third edition of this volume (now jacket-titled *Western Birds*) was published in 1990, its final version. It was most recently reprinted in 1998, and the paperback version is currently priced at \$18.00.

In 1973 Roger collaborated with Edward L. Chalif to produce *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. First printing copies are so identified on the copyright page and were initially priced at \$8.95. Its jacket title was simplified in 1987 to *Mexican Birds*, but the text has remained unchanged, and it is currently priced at \$22.00.

In an effort to compete with the ever-increasing array of bird field guides, Peterson also extensively revised and enlarged his eastern field guide, publishing the fourth edition in 1980, with its jacket title being simplified to *Eastern Birds* in 1987. Peterson's fifth edition of his classic eastern field guide was published posthumously, in 2002, using a slightly larger page format (5 x 8.5") than in earlier editions, and retailing currently at \$22.00.

Some recent permutations of the eastern field guide have included an oversized (6.7 x 10.6") large-type version of the fourth edition, published in 1999 and currently priced at \$24.00. Some shortened and simplified versions of the Peterson guides for novice naturalists (*Peterson First Guides*) have been produced as well. The bird volume in this series was published in 1998, and is currently priced at \$5.95. A children's coloring-book, *A Field Guide to the Birds Coloring Book*, was published in 1982, in collaboration with Peter Alden and John Sill.

As a celebration of Roger Tory Peterson's contributions to field identification, a near-facsimile reprint of the first edition of the eastern field guide was recently published by Houghton Mifflin. It may be easily distinguished from the actual first edition by its distinctive dust jacket, the rear jacket having a photo of Roger Petersen and a printed price tag of \$18.95. Inside, a commemorative statement appears opposite the book's title page. The color plates lack tissue guards, but the monochrome plates (showing the "dirty" swan and egrets) appear as they do in the first and second printings.

Variant deluxe editions of the Peterson bird guides have also been published. In 1980 Houghton Mifflin published a full-leather-bound and author-signed fourth edition of the eastern guide. This limited edition consisted of 1,000 numbered copies. In 1990 Houghton Mifflin produced a corresponding leather-bound version of the third edition of the western guide, with 2,000 signed and numbered copies, retailing at \$125.00.

Also in the 1980's, "The Fiftieth Anniversary Edition" of all 48 of the then-available Peterson-series guides appeared. They were printed between 1984 and 1986 by the Easton Press, and were bound in full leather, with gilt edging. These "Collector's Lifetime Edition" guides include the fourth edition of the eastern guide (1984), the third edition of the western guide (1984), the Mexican guide (1984), the second edition of the Texas guide (1985), and the fourth edition of the guide to Britain and European birds (1985). Some of these copies were author-signed.

Finally, coffee-table versions of the artwork of both the eastern (fourth edition) and western (third edition) field guides include *The Field Guide Art of*

*Roger Tory Peterson*, published by Easton Press in 1990. These leather-bound and large-folio (11.5 x 17.4") volumes have enlarged and unlabelled versions of his field guide plates, with matching captions printed on facing pages. Apparently all copies of this "Collector's Edition" were signed by Peterson. A cloth-backed "First Trade Edition" was distributed by Houghton Mifflin in 1992, also signed by Peterson.

#### Collectible Editions and Retail Values of Peterson's Bird Guides

Only 2,000 copies of the first printing ("first state") of Peterson's eastern guide were printed and released in April of 1934. Three subsequent printing variants, or "states," of the first edition were printed during the next five years. Each of these may be easily distinguished as follows:

*First state:* Publication date (1934) is printed on bottom of title page, all four color plates have tissue guards, "bob-pumper" misprint appears in index, and the Whistling Swan and White Egret illustrations opposite page 12 (egrets) and 18 (Whistling Swan) have "dirty" gray plumages.

*Second state:* No date on title page, tissue guards are present, "bob-pumper" in index has been corrected to "bog-pumper" (a vernacular name for the American Bittern), egrets and swan still have dirty plumages.

*Third state:* No date on title page, tissue guards are present, clean swan and egrets.

*Fourth state:* No date on title page, no tissue guards, clean swan and egrets. Of all these various titles and editions, the two earliest states of the first printing of the eastern guide are easily the most valuable, with first state copies recently being offered by book dealers at prices of \$2,500 to \$3,000. A copy of the almost equally rare second state version was recently offered at \$2,500. The increasingly more common third and fourth state versions are valued substantially lower; a copy of the third state was recently advertised at about \$500. So-called "late" first edition printings, presumably fourth state copies, have recently been offered by book dealers in the range of \$150 to \$675 (average of six, \$275).

None of the other subsequent Peterson field guide titles has attained a secondary-market value anywhere approaching these. The leather-bound special edition guides that were published by Easton Press in the mid-1980's are often available from used-book dealers for from \$50 to \$150 (average of six, \$107). The similar signed and numbered editions of Peterson's eastern and western guides that were published by Houghton Mifflin have recently been offered at prices ranging from \$95 to \$250 for the eastern guide (average of seven, \$167), and from \$60 to \$145 for the western guide (average of eight, \$102).

The leather-bound and folio-sized Easton Press volumes of Peterson's field guide art have also been offered recently by used-book dealers in the range of \$200 to \$300 (average of ten, \$243) for the two-volume signed set. Single volumes of either title have recently ranged from \$90 to \$200 (average of six, \$131). Cloth-bound folio-sized copies having the Houghton Mifflin imprint and Peterson's signature likewise generally sell for \$250 to \$300 for the two-volume set, and \$75 to \$150 for single volumes.

First printings of the western bird guide's first edition (which often go unrecognized since they are not obviously marked as such) generally sell at \$50 to \$60. First printings of later editions of the western guide (which are clearly identified) have been offered recently at \$50 to \$75 (second edition) and \$44 to \$70 (third edition). Signed or inscribed copies of the easily identified first printing of the guide to Mexican birds have recently been offered by used-book dealers at prices from \$95 to \$125.

So-described first printing copies of the guide to the birds of Britain and Europe have recently been offered from \$20 (fair condition) to about \$45.50, which seems a greatly undervalued price range, but the first printing of this book must have been substantial. First-printings of the many foreign-language versions of this title were not researched by me, but might make an interesting and still-inexpensive collecting area. Likewise, the nearly contemporary 1946–1957 *Audubon Bird Guide* series, written by Richard H. Pough and illustrated by Don Eckelberry, is highly attractive, and copies can still rather easily be found. There are three separate volumes, covering small eastern land birds (1946), water and large land birds (1951) and western birds (1957). Their first printings (which for the 1946 volume is not clearly identified) so far have not significantly increased in cost among rare book dealers.

Like nearly all books, first-printings of Peterson's field guides are easily the most desirable for book-collectors to have, at least from the standpoint of later appreciation in value. Obviously, later versions are likely to contain more and better color plates, updated bird names and terminology, and sometimes increased species coverage. The leather-bound versions of the Peterson guides have not increased greatly in resale value from their original retail prices, and clearly were intended to remain on bookshelves rather than to be taken into the field. For most birders, the real value of any field guide is not what its future monetary worth might be, but rather how useful it actually is as an aid to field identification of birds. In this regard, the Peterson guides have set the bar that others have tried to surpass for nearly 75 years.