acceptance speech
Audubon medal
November 29, 1984

My dear friends,

In thanking the Board of Directors of National Audubon Society for this very great honor, I must confess to you a personal sense of uneasiness that increasing growth and complexity of the conservation field strongly suggest that the Board should consider giving Audubon Medals to more than one person each year. Notice that the Presidential Medal of Freedom, of which our own Roger T. Peterson is such a distinguished recipient, is appropriately awarded each year to a half-dozen people. And think of this added dividend at our annual dinner: you could excuse each awardee from giving a speech of acceptance...and, at the dinner, people like Pete Peterkin could relax completely!

At this late hour, I feel I should avoid burdening you with weighty accounts of impending disasters and extinctions, and instead regale you with some historical highlights of the birdlife of New York City as once experienced by that Rara Avis, a native New Yorker (myself).

I should tell you that it is a bit emotional for any native to be called home to receive the honor you are bestowing on me, and all sorts of memories crowd to the front from my forgotten past. To a birder the thrilling pictures of life birds never die. My first male redstart was at Hunt's Point in The Bronx...my first male prothonotory warbler in Bronx Park...my first purple gallinule in Central Park...and that stunning swallow-tailed kite that flew over first base as Allan Cruickshank and I were watching a baseball game at NYU is as vivid to me tonight as it was on the afternoon of April 30, 1928 over 50 years ago.

Did you know that New York in the 1930s was famous for a continuously breeding barn owl population which was unique in the United States? In southern California, for instance, this species raised two broods a year; in New York City, at least three. A national survey by George Wallace disclosed that 4% of the average barn owl's food consisted of Norway rats; in a Bronx River coal yard only 200 yards from a municipal garbage dump, my friend Irving Kassoy found a pair feeding 100% of the time on the common rat, Rattus norvegicus. Incidentally, if you ever need to know why this nasty creature was named norvegicus, I can tell you. I was told a few years ago almost in confidence by a Norwegian scientist that it was simply because Carl Linnaeus thoroughly disliked Norwegians. In fact he even named a louse norvegicus.

Although barn owls here are supposed to be at the northern boundary of their range, my friend Kassoy found a Bronx River pair in which the female was a bird banded as a nestling on Martha's Vineyard. And in Bronx Park an example of the strikingly white arctic race of the Great Horned Owl was found on Feb. 15, 1919, the first and only record for New York State and the third U.S. record east of the Rockies.

I must confess we New Yorkers were never long on snowy owls, but we sure were loaded with gulls. Twelve different kinds have been recorded within our city limits with many thousands wintering over at our municipal garbage dumps in the 1930s. I can remember seeing up to eleven white-winged gulls on a single dump in one day in The Bronx. These of course were wintering birds. We even saw one in mid-summer. It was flightless, and we brought it to The

Bronx Zoo where it moulted out into a splendid 2nd-year Kumlien's gull; the 1st-year plumage of the Kumlien's was unknown at that time.

It is a fact well known to my family that I have a markedly defective olfactory sense, and they attribute this condition to the trueism that as a youth I probably spent too many hours studying gulls on New York City garbage dumps.

But gull checking was indeed fun. On the one hand, there was the thrill of spotting rare European birds like Scandinavian and British lesser black-backed gulls which I think were found more often in the New York City area than in any other region in North America. And on the other hand, there was the fun of counting color-banded herring gulls from nine colonies stretching north to New Brunswick and Quebec. Some 25,000 of these were marked in the 1930s so that each colony and the year of banding could be separated on migration.

In 1938 in the general vicinity of New York City six of us on one day counted 45 banded gulls from seven colonies; in 1939, our banded-gull count on a single day was up to 61. The gull counters included such distinguished ornithologists as Robert S. Arbib, Jr., and Roger Tory Peterson. I was always amused that, although most of these birds migrated right past Boston as they did New York, they were almost never recorded there. Boston birdwatchers were just plain too fastidious.

The high point of New York's birding in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the nesting of the peregrine falcon on Manhattan Island. The peak number of nesting birds on the lower Hudson in

those years was 9 pairs. About 20 different individuals overwintered each year in the city. In 1938 a pair took up year-round residence in mid-Manhattan, the same year that another pair began to lay eggs on the Sun Life building in Montreal. Our New York birds frequented 515 Madison Avenue at first and later a half-built and half-abandoned skyscraper on the corner of 72nd Street and West End Avenue. Their main eyrie was the Hotel St. Regis on Fifth Avenue where they nested in 1943, 1946, and 1947. The sight of the male peregrine racing down the avenue over the taxicabs and after a pigeon was one of the great spectacles of Atlantic Coast birding. The excitement reached a peak in 1947 when a motion picture actress, Miss Olivia DeHaviland, decided to take a sunbath on a balcony within a few feet of the peregrine nest full of half-grown young. You can readily visualize the pandemonium that followed. Our female peregrine falcon began to scream and attack Miss DeHaviland who retreated in panic and bewilderment. The management was called. The N.Y. Police Department followed. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was next brought in. Rosalie Edge of Hawk Mt. Sanctuary was consulted. In the end our Fifth Avenue babies were removed from the St. Regis, sent to Lehigh University, and raised on top of the Biology Building there by Prof. F. J. Trembley. Fifth Avenue has not been the same ever since.

As you know, we ultimately lost the entire U.S. population of peregrines east of the Rockies to DDT, but it is pleasing to know that today, thanks to Prof. Tom Cade and the Peregrine Fund, the peregrine falcon is now freely nesting on the Atlantic Seaboard, and one pair raised young this year in New York City.

It is appropriate here for me to acknowledge the very great help I once got from the National Audubon Society in the exciting attempt to learn the reasons for the puzzling decline of the peregrine falcon population both here and in Europe. The story starts in 1962, when it was rumored at the XIIIth International Ornithological Congress that not a single young peregrine had been raised that spring in the Northeast. It was just a rumor, not a research report.

1963 was the blockbuster: Dr. Derek A. Ratcliffe, the British ornithologist, published a fairly long paper showing that a major population crash had taken place in the British peregrine and that he suspected pesticides. I set out at once to organize a team to check out the actual status of known peregrine sites in the eastern U.S.

In 1964 this well-grounded well-financed team failed to find a single occupied peregrine site among 133 known to exist in the East, many for decades. We were indeed in trouble. That same spring I visited a half dozen raptor-research scientists all over western Europe. Their peregrine populations were crashing too from Switzerland north to Finland.

It therefore seemed absolutely imperative that we call an international symposium to bring all these population stories into focus and plan the research that was needed to explain exactly what was taking place. I did get immediate encouragement from the U.S. Public Health Service, but the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior turned me down cold. It was at this point, when I was becoming very discouraged, that Audubon's Pres. Buchheister phoned me, right out of the blue, to say that his Board of Directors had just voted me some $8,500 to help

make the Madison Peregrine Conference a reality. I never had communicated with Audubon about such a symposium, and I never did learn how they reached a figure like $8,500. I was told that the whole idea was the brain-child of board member Roger Tory Peterson. It seems to be absolutely certain that this was the critical decision that brought scientists and naturalists together from seven countries and led to the extraordinary discovery that on two continents parent peregrine falcons were breaking and eating their own eggs.

This is only one example of the important behind-the-scenes role played by National Audubon Society in the highly complicated evaluation of DDT during the 1960s.

Having seen such work of this Society close-up during this thrilling period, I want to take advantage of my opportunity tonight to acknowledge the effective role the National Audubon Society has long played in preserving our natural environment in America.

Tonight, I especially want to thank the Board of Directors for bestowing on me the Audubon Medal.