

## BIRDLAND

## A-Birding in the Bronx

FRANK GRAHAM JR.

**D**URING A RECENT tour of the Bronx Zoo, members of the National Audubon Society's staff and board of directors saw, close up, the first elephant ever born at the zoo.

"In fact, when little Astor arrived here last August it was the first time an elephant had been born in the Bronx in 9,500 years," said William Conway, director of the zoo. "Wild elephants used to roam in this area, but not even Joe Hickey's bird club saw them."

Joseph Hickey, a former president of the American Ornithologists' Union and now a member of Audubon's board, chuckled with the others at Bill Conway's pleasantry, though he might have disputed its accuracy. For years the Bronx County Bird Club had no titular leader. But Hickey remains closely identified with it, and its influence on American bird-watching and ornithology is so pervasive that it almost smacks of pre-history.

Every birder must be familiar with Hickey's comment on bird-watching: "By some, it is regarded as a mild paralysis of the central nervous system, which can be cured only by rising at dawn and sitting in a bog." But the image left by members of the Bronx County Bird Club (the BCBC to all involved) is anything but sedentary. The picture we have is of a band of thoroughly absorbed youths dashing

across New York City's five boroughs and beyond, tracking down rare birds and rumors thereof, indulging in gamesmanship and the finer points of identification, and in the end revolutionizing the way people go out and look at birds.

The club produced some of the golden names in modern bird study. Joe Hickey was one of the original group of schoolboy birders who called themselves the Hunts Point Dumpers, because they spent so much time in the early 1920s at that Bronx trash heap looking for rare birds and other scavengers. Three other boys accompanied Hickey on his visits to the dump and nearby salt meadows. They were Richard Herbert (whom Hickey had met when they were second-graders together), John Matuszewski (known simply as Matty Matthews), and Irving Kassoy (of whom more later).

At Evander Childs High School in the Bronx and in various birding places such as Van Cortlandt Park, other boys encountered and joined the group. There were the Kuerzi brothers, John and Dick, Phil Kessler, Fred Ruff, and Allan Cruickshank.

"Those were the original nine boys in our group, and this place right here was one of the open spaces where we used to come and look for birds," Hickey said, taking time out from his recent tour of the

Bronx Zoo. "I remember one of the really great birds we found around here was the black-backed three-toed woodpecker. We used to get good birds here on Lake Agassiz too, especially for our Christmas Bird Count. For instance, there was always a gadwall. And how about that dovekie, Roger?"

Hickey couldn't repress a grin as he nodded at Roger Tory Peterson, who was also on the zoo tour. Peterson rolled his eyes in resignation, as if having been disappointed in his hope that Hickey would forget the dovekie.

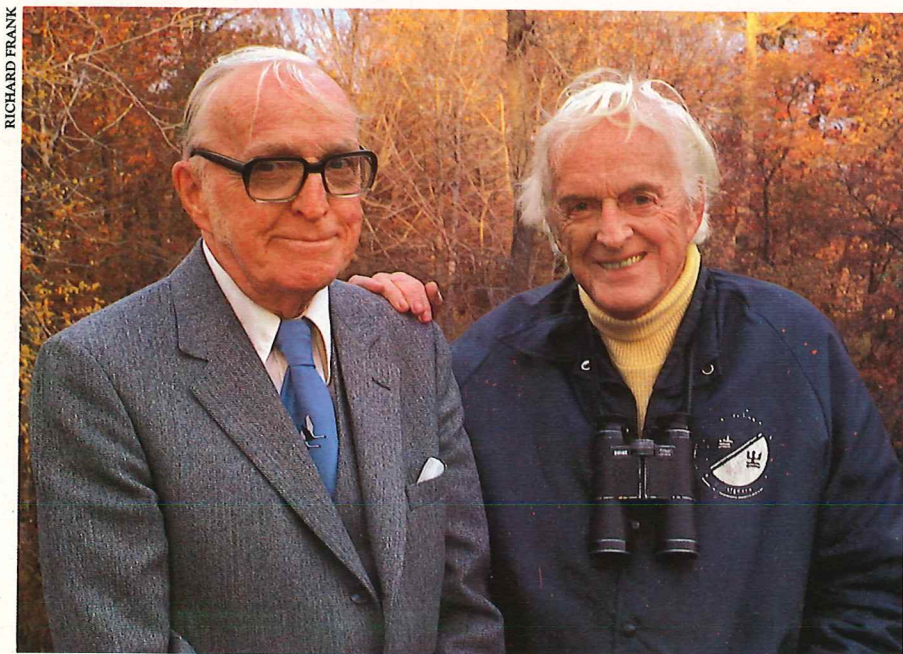
"But remember, I wasn't the one to claim that its head was moving," Peterson said, relaxing into a sheepish smile.

The dovekie came to light some time after Peterson had joined the club as its first non-Bronx member. The boys' leader was John Kuerzi, and they began meeting regularly in the evenings in a clubroom at the Kuerzi home near the Harlem River. They referred to their group as the Bronx County Bird Club, and came together only to talk about birds and question each other sharply about controversial sightings. The one established club to which they belonged was the Linnaean Society of New York.

"The Linnaean meetings were held at the American Museum of Natural History, and that's where we met Roger when he first came to New York," Hickey recalled. "He went out with us, and he was always talking about the birds he had seen back in his hometown, Jamestown, New York, so we called him Roger Tory Jamestown Peterson. But we let him into our club anyway."

The dovekie, which is a seabird related to the puffins, was discovered on a Christmas Count. The BCBC had taken in other members by this time. A prankster carved out a dovekie from a block of wood, painted it black and white in the appropriate places, and anchored it in the middle of Lake Agassiz. The sharp-eyed Peterson, who was not the intended victim of the hoax, spotted this Arctic bird and spread the exciting news. Although the decoy listed a bit, one observer claimed to have seen it move its head.

That evening, when all of the club members came together to tabulate their sightings and report their rarities, Peterson and his party withheld their secret until



RICHARD FRANK

Joe Hickey (left) and Roger Tory Peterson: schoolboys in the wild Bronx.

the very end of the meeting. Everyone else was in on the plot. The roar of derision still rings in Peterson's ears.

"Well, at least we identified the species correctly," he said on that recent afternoon in the zoo.

**B**UT LIVING BIRDS were then everywhere in evidence. Fort Apache was not yet a part of the scene, and much of the Bronx was occupied by comfortable apartment houses and well-kept, even luxurious, homes. There were salt marshes, old estates, and abundant parkland, one of the most inviting for both birds and birders being Van Cortlandt Park in the north Bronx. This park was an entity in the 1920s, before the intrusion of highways, and had as its centerpiece a swamp that was rich in plants and birdlife. John Kieran, the nature writer and radio sage who sometimes joined the BCBC members on their outings, once described them birding in the park:

"Often I heard and saw them going a-whoopin' and a-hollerin' through the cattail region of the Van Cortlandt marsh, clapping hands loudly at the same time. The din was supposed to—and frequently did—stir up rails that might otherwise be left unseen amid the cattails and marsh grasses."

Virginia rails and soras were resident in the swamp, and according to Kieran, Allan Cruickshank even recorded the successful nesting of a king rail there in 1927. Although the club members haunted other such garden spots as Bronx Park (site of the Bronx Zoo) and the Bronx Botanical Garden, they did not neglect the seamier side of the five boroughs.

"We were addicted to the Hunts Point Dump, and one winter we found four snowy owls feeding on rats," Peterson said. "But the best place for gulls was a sewer outlet at 92nd Street in Brooklyn. We even found European species such as black-headed and little gulls there. You know, the city ruined a lot of good birding places when they cleaned up those dumps and sewers."

One night, at a Linnaean meeting, someone reported that a purple gallinule had been sighted at the northern end of Central Park. When the meeting ended, the Bronx boys rushed uptown to the lake near 110th Street and, just before midnight, found the gallinule in the glow of a nearby streetlight. At a more appropriate

hour of the day, Hickey and Cruickshank looked up from a baseball game they were attending at New York University's Ohio Field and saw a swallow-tailed kite. It was the first recorded sighting of this southern species over the city.

Hickey, a red-headed whirlwind, was also making a name for himself in collegiate athletics at that time, having gone on to NYU. Running the mile, he won eastern intercollegiate championships both indoors and out. He was elected class president in his senior year, and Cruickshank was elected president of the junior class at the same time. But birds remained Hickey's chief interest, even after he graduated and went to work for Con Edison for "eight awful years."

None of the Bronx club birded in a vacuum. The members had a shining example in Ludlow Griscom, reputedly the finest birder of his time, whom they had met at Linnaean meetings. Griscom was one of those marvelously talented persons who belie the cliché of the bird-watcher as an individual chained to a single outlook on life. Born into a wealthy New York family in 1890, he had crossed the Atlantic almost every year during his youth and mastered a number of European languages. He was said to have been such a

skillful pianist that he contemplated a concert career. But his boyhood experiences with birds in Central Park determined the course of his life and made him astonishingly adept at sight identification in an era when most ornithologists depended on the shotgun to confirm an observation.

"His mental reactions were all fast—fast in conversation, fast in driving his car, fast in identification," Edwin Way Teale once wrote of Griscom. "He always seemed poised on the balls of his feet, never standing flat-footed."

Griscom graduated from Columbia in 1912 and went on to Cornell, where he became Arthur A. Allen's first graduate student in ornithology. Later he was assistant curator of ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History (and later still at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge). The Bronx boys did their best to emulate his wizardry in the field and quickly improved their accuracy under his stern cross-examinations.

"Ludlow was our God, and his BIRDS OF THE NEW YORK CITY REGION became our Bible," Roger Peterson wrote in his obituary of Griscom in *The Auk*. "We could recite chapter and verse and even adopted his inflections when we pro-



"I know summer is icumen in, but that's no reason for lhude singing."

nounced a bird to be 'unprecedented' or a 'common summer resident.' John Kuerzi, the leader of our group, even adopted the Griscom hair-do, parting his own hair in the center."

In the same article, Peterson recalled some of the typical Griscomisms with which he flavored every trip into the field:

"Let's stop here and flap our ears . . . Well, we bumped that one off . . . That's just a weed bird . . . Now someone find a bird with some zip in it . . . Just drabs and drabs left . . . Unprecedented! . . . Please lower your voice to a howl . . . I don't like the look of that bird . . . We got skunked on that one . . . That's just a ten-cent bird."

Joe Hickey, as we shall see, did not quite share the general reverence for Griscom and drifted toward a leader of his own.

"Ludlow was really just a gamesman," Hickey said to Peterson on that recent day at the Bronx Zoo, obviously trying to get a rise out of his old friend.

Peterson was not willing to snap at the bait. "Yes, he was a gamesman, all right," Roger nodded. "But unlike a few hotshots I could name who are around today, he was a good ornithologist, too."

Peterson has never disguised his debt to Griscom. The older man emphasized field marks to identify birds at a distance—the thickening of a bill, the glint of a wingbar, the flash of color in the tail, the patch of color on throat or rump. Peterson made note of Griscom's pointers in the field and, because of his training as an artist, decided

to put them down on paper. He made patternistic sketches of the more difficult birds, indicating the diagnostic markings with little arrows, and took them into the field with him for his own use. These were the drawings that would turn bird-watching into a supersport.

**F**OR THE TIME BEING, Griscom's example stimulated the BCBC members to spectacular feats of identification. Most of the members were extremely competitive and relished the game of listing birds, each trying to outdo the other in finding the most species, or detecting the first spring migrants, or even imitating birdcalls. They had all somehow managed to scrape together the money to buy binoculars, such as the six-power World War I German field glasses that Hickey owned or the four-power pair of LeMaire glasses that Peterson had picked up for about seven dollars after reading an ad for them in *Bird-Lore*. Now some of them pooled their funds to buy an old Buick for fifty dollars and drove all over the city and the suburbs to find birds.

The Christmas Bird Count provided the year's culminating event. Before the middle 1920s, most of those counts had been made by small, uncoordinated parties fanning out over the countryside. The Bronx contingent changed the entire nature of the event, orchestrating the effort as if it were a military campaign. In 1924 they listed only fifty species on the Bronx count.

"After that we expanded the area to include some of the southern parts of Westchester County, and eventually our group listed over a hundred species,"

Hickey said. "We took great delight in competing against all the other bird clubs in the region—against the older ornithologists and the businessmen. Those fellows would be at work during the week, but we would get out of classes early and make detailed surveys of the whole area, just as the better count leaders do today. We would stake out certain birds and assign observers to go out there on the appointed day and find them. One Christmas I had five warblers staked out. I couldn't find any of them on the day of the count, but at least I had something to look for."

The members of the Bronx County Bird Club were going beyond the Christmas Count to revolutionize bird-watching itself. On a chilly, misty morning in the winter of 1930, several BCBC members set out in the communal Buick to look for eagles and canvasbacks along the Hudson River. One of the young men in the car was William Vogt, who later became editor of *Audubon* and a prominent conservationist. Peterson showed him his patternistic sketches.

"Bill was quite excited about them," Peterson said. "He thought they were very helpful, and he urged me to write a bird guide. I didn't take him seriously at first, but he kept after me. Finally I put my drawings together, and Bill offered to take the guide around to different publishers. Five of them turned it down, so I got it back from Bill and brought it to Houghton Mifflin in Boston; the first Peterson guide was published in 1934."

There is no need here to retell the story of its success. But meanwhile, other club members were striking out on their own. Allan Cruickshank, after mastering the art of bird identification, went a step further and decided to capture birds on film, eventually becoming one of the leading bird photographers of his time. In 1942 he updated Griscom's work and published his own book, *BIRDS AROUND NEW YORK CITY*.

Dick Herbert, though not a falconer, made peregrines his specialty. He went into banking but moonlighted by studying peregrine eyries on the Hudson Palisades (as well as on New York City skyscrapers) and made important contributions to the literature just as those magnificent birds of prey were beginning to disappear from the Northeast.

Irving Kassoy, another of the original club members, became a jeweler and an expert on barn owls. He spent hours sitting in drafty belfries at night, studying his favorite species and compiling voluminous notes until at last, according to his friends, he took on a remarkable resemblance to an owl.

