



Louis Schakel  
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# The Bronx Age

*Nine New York teenagers and their birding revolution.*

by Julie G. Ridl

It's the early twenties. The Roaring Twenties. As the post-war decade unfolds, the country loosens its purse-strings and its morals. Older generations are shocked by new social trends, by bobbed hair and rolled stockings, by jazz music, fox-trotting and public displays of affection. Prohibition adds a dimension of daring to the simple cocktail, goading the youths of the day to "get blotto," as they call it. This

revolution against the accepted American order, compared to the Red Scare just past, is perhaps more frightening because it is being led by America's youth.

In 1924, New York City, a gang of teenage boys prowl through Bronx Park. One of their members, breathless, has reported a spectacle near Lake Agassiz. The nine boys skulk through the brush toward the lake. Quietly, quietly. They shift in loose

formation, their movements familiar—a pack of wolves closing in on their prey. The foliage parts, and the promised view is revealed. They are transfixed. Breaths catch, pulses race, hands tremble. They pass a pair of opera glasses back and forth, taking in every delicious detail of the beautiful and delicate creatures before them.

It is their first look at a pair of Red Crossbills.

Part of the Bronx County Bird Club arsenal (left), including Roger Tory Peterson's first pair of field glasses, minutes from the launch of the BCBC, the Reed guide and Ludlow Griscom's Birds of the New York City Region.

The gang of nine comprised the original Bronx County Bird Club (BCBC). They were part of a revolution alright. But not of the larger revolution raging about them. Without the mad money or inclination to support the trendy social frivolities of alcohol, girls and steamy movies, they turned their youthful revolt to cheaper pursuits. Gathering in the attic of 978 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx, this handful of young men schemed and planned and did their bit, a good bit, for the revolution of birding. Its members would go on to make great contributions to ornithology and art, and to birders around the world.

The ranks of the nine original members of the BCBC—Joseph Hickey, Allan (Cruicky) Cruickshank, John and Richard Kuerzi, Richard Herbert, Phil Kessler, Irving Kassoy, Frederick Ruff and John (Matty) Matuszewski—all Bronx residents, were later broken by the non-Bronx import from Jamestown, Roger Tory Peterson. As the years progressed, the BCBC held several other notables, who themselves have contributed to the tradition of the scrappy, record-setting "Bronx Boys" of the twenties.

Two of the members, ornithologist Joseph Hickey, eighty-two, and renowned field-guide author and artist Roger Tory Peterson, eighty-one, paused in their chaotic schedules last summer to reminisce over their youthful exploits with the club. Their memories spew forth dates, times and locations of specific bird

sightings shared among the group on various birding adventures, but particularly on Christmas Bird Censuses, the BCBC's *raison d'être*.

The minutes of the club's first meeting, dated November 29, 1924, give a straightforward, perhaps terse account of the business dis-

ered the Hunt's Point Dump of the early twenties a birder's Mecca. The BCBC spent so much time there, locating such rarities as the Little Blue Heron, Double-crested Cormorant, Common Moorhen, Wilson's Phalarope, Short-eared Owl, Black-bellied Plover and Snowy Owl, they were dubbed "the Hunt's Dumpers."

"Well, we lived close to it, and it was the best place to look for Snowy Owls and rarities," recalls Peterson, looking to his friend for confirmation.

"It was a garbage dump," says Hickey.

"A good garbage dump."

"A good garbage dump."

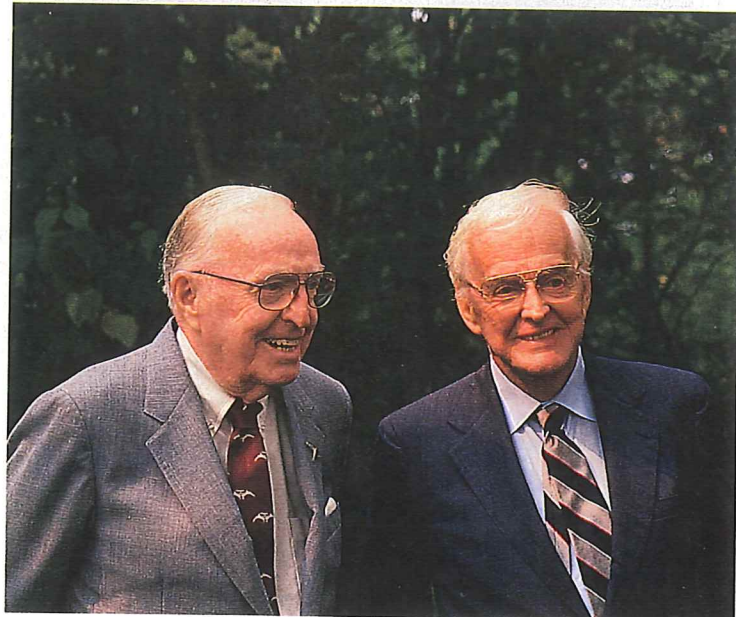
"How can you tell a good garbage dump from a bad garbage dump?" asked an observer.

"You count how many Snowy Owls come in there in the winter," says Peterson.

And on goes the recollecting, Hickey and Peterson, like the vaudevillians of their youth, feeding each other lines and finishing each other's sentences, slipping into step though they haven't seen one another for a year or two.

Hickey recalls the first several BCBC Christmas Bird Censuses, the records of which were passed on to the Linnaean Society of New York for tabulation. This was before the days of the *Audubon Field Notes*, which would eventually give rise to *American Birds*.

The gang's first organized Bronx Christmas census, in 1924, not long after that first attic meeting, tallied forty-nine species. In 1925 the number jumped to sixty-seven, then to eighty-three in 1926, this figure including six species of owls. For each of the three years, the boys held the northeastern-states record for the most number of species sighted.



Julie G. Ridd

Two of modern birdwatching's cornerstones, Joe Hickey (left) and Roger Tory Peterson, reflect on their youthful birding exploits with the Bronx County Bird Club.

cussed. No flowery goal-setting or objective-stating for this crew. In the first two short graphs, the nine gather, elect officers, pattern the meetings after those of the prestigious Linnaean Society of New York and decide to hold their monthly meetings in the Kuerzi attic. Without further encumbrance, they then move on to the much more important business of planning their surveillance of the Bronx's birding hot spots.

The Bronx? Absolutely. Their New York hot spots included Van Cortlandt Park, Bronx Park, encompassing the Botanical Gardens and Lake Agassiz, Jerome Park Reservoir, various sewers, and especially and particularly, the Hunt's Point Dump.

Today's birders, who know well the value of a dump for attracting unusual species, would have consid-

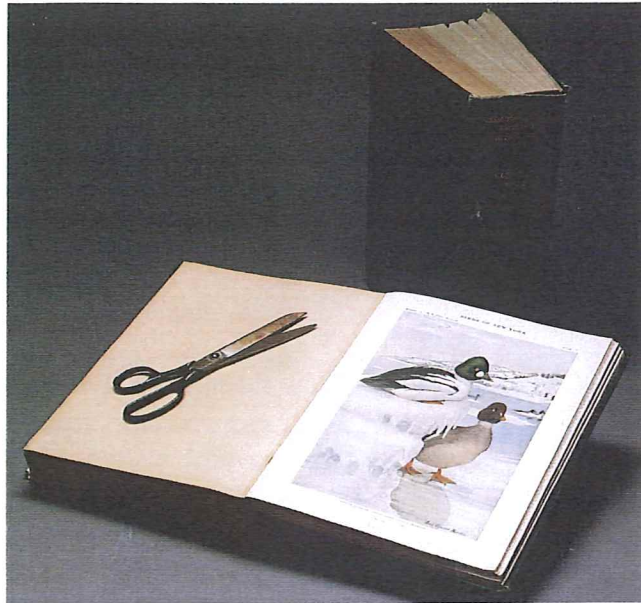
Instead of the fifteen-mile-diameter count circle, they eventually used an equilateral triangle, fifteen miles on each side, to fit in a bit of Long Island and Greenwich. These areas they dubbed the "Greater Bronx."

The Bronx club did not bird completely without counsel. From time to time various influences guided their growth and direction. In pre-BCBC, pre-teen days, Joseph Hickey and Dick Herbert, sans binoculars, sans field guides, birded by climbing a maple and waiting for the warblers to come in close. Then Hickey rescued part of the first volume of Elon Howard Eaton's *Birds of New York* (University of the State of New York, 1910) from a trash can. He cut the birds out of the color plates and stuffed them into an envelope. This prized envelope, along with Chester Reed's check-book-sized *Guide to the Land Birds East of the Rockies*, would serve as their field reference for many years. Reed's preface and his tidy lessons in popular bird study, given at the front of the guide, are replete with conservation doctrine as Reed implores his readers to do all they can to save, promote and study the diminishing numbers of birds about them.

Not long after finding Eaton's book, on a scouting trip to Bronx Park, Hickey and Herbert spotted an unusual looking man studying chickadees through a pair of opera glasses. The man wore a derby and a Vandyke beard, and carried a gold-headed cane. He was Charles M. Johnston, a member of the Linnaean Society of New York, then working for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. And he was a birder.

The boys introduced themselves and tagged along, spattering Johnston with their questions. Says Hickey, "I was peeking in my envelope at these cutout silhouettes of

birds, and we knew nothing about them, so we asked him, had he ever seen an Ivory Gull? Had he ever seen a Ross' Gull?" They went on with their interrogation for an hour before returning to the bird house to warm up.



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Joe Hickey and Dick Kuerzi's enveloped "bird guide" was stuffed with cutouts of the Louis Agassiz Fuertes plates from a discarded copy of Eaton's *Birds of New York*.

There Johnston met the Stark brothers, eminent New York birders, introducing these boys who knew their warblers but had no field glasses with which to study them. Not long after this introduction, one of the Starks sent Hickey and Herbert a spare pair of old opera glasses.

The combined arsenal of their Reed guide, their cutouts, their opera glasses, the New York Public Library and a good deal of determination carried the boys quite far as birders. But through their contact with the Linnaean Society of New York, they met the man who would serve for years as their censusing task-master: the eminent and matchless Ludlow Griscom, author of *Birds of the New York City Region* (American Museum of Natural History, 1923). Griscom, widely acclaimed in the birding community to have brought into popularity the practice of birding by glass instead of by gun, an impatient and brilliant

man, prodded, cajoled, challenged and shaped the BCBC into a formidable birding command. He had developed and passed on to club members, according to Joseph Kastner in his *A World of Watchers* (Knopf, 1986), "the retort discourteous," in which birders, upon reporting their sightings, are grilled for the facts and their degrees of competency before their sightings are accepted. Hickey recalls Griscom's periodic declaration: "Those records aren't worth a cheesy damn!" The leader had been intolerant of inexactness in any birder, and this intolerance drove the Bronx Boys to perfect their skills.

Many years later it would be Griscom who demonstrates to Houghton-Mifflin publishers that the new field guide they were considering, one that concentrated on quick identification by field marks, would revolutionize birdwatching. Of course, that guide was Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*, first published in 1934. "I'm often given the credit for this great explosion [in birding]," says Peterson, demurring, "but simply because I was an artist who was able to put it all down. I couldn't have written my field guide without the BCBC and Griscom."

"Putting it all down," became a lifetime's work for Peterson, as for some other members of the club. This brand of focused dedication can be traced to the influence of Dr. Ernst Mayr, an ornithologist who came to the States from Germany to work at the American Museum. Hickey in particular nestled under Mayr's wing. "When Mayr moved into the American Museum," recalls Hickey, "he wanted to learn something about American birds. The best way to know American birds was to pal around with the Bronx County Bird Club."

"He quickly got educated, then educated us," says Peterson.

"And he said, 'Everybody's got to have a problem.'"

By "problem" Mayr meant that every scientist ought to have a study, a specialty to be worked on systematically and thoroughly. "And we laughed at first," remembers Hickey, who in time brought Mayr's advice to bear in his studies of bird mortality rates, populations, and the effects of DDT on wildlife.

Some other members' problems also bore fruit: Irving Kassoy spent countless nights studying Barn Owls (According to Peterson, "He began to look like an owl, eventually."), Allan Cruickshank became a distinguished bird photographer, Richard Herbert studied Peregrines and shared his findings before it was too late for those magnificent birds. And of course there was Peterson. Through the years the Bronx boys grew into men who made inestimable contributions to birds and birding through the working out of "problems."

"Then one day I got a letter from Irv Kassoy, who was down living in Florida, and he said he had cancer and it was terminal." Hickey, the club's secretary, who had acted

as the group's communication hub through fifty years of friendship, got that call in 1977. In turn he phoned Peterson and the other club members to announce that he was convening a meeting of the Bronx County Bird Club.

They held their meeting—a symposium really—at a hotel in Fort Myers, Florida, with four of the original members in attendance. Al Thomas, a later member of the BCBC, and Ginny Peterson filled the ranks. Helen Cruickshank, Cruicky's wid-

presented her slides of African birds; Kassoy discussed his Owl research; Dick Kuerzi gave a talk on Tree Swallows; Peterson presented Penguin films and Hickey discussed the birds of the Pribilofs.

"At that meeting we knew it was going to be the last meeting of the BCBC," says Hickey. "So we elected a permanent president, Roger, by acclamation..."

"And you were named the permanent secretary," reminds Peterson.

Hickey and Peterson sit quietly for one reflective moment, shaking their heads and smiling back to their beginnings and to each other.


"By God we saw some rare birds, though, didn't we Roger?" says Hickey. "In the old days, Cruicky and I, watching a baseball game at NYU, spotted that Swallow-tailed Kite over the pitcher's mound."

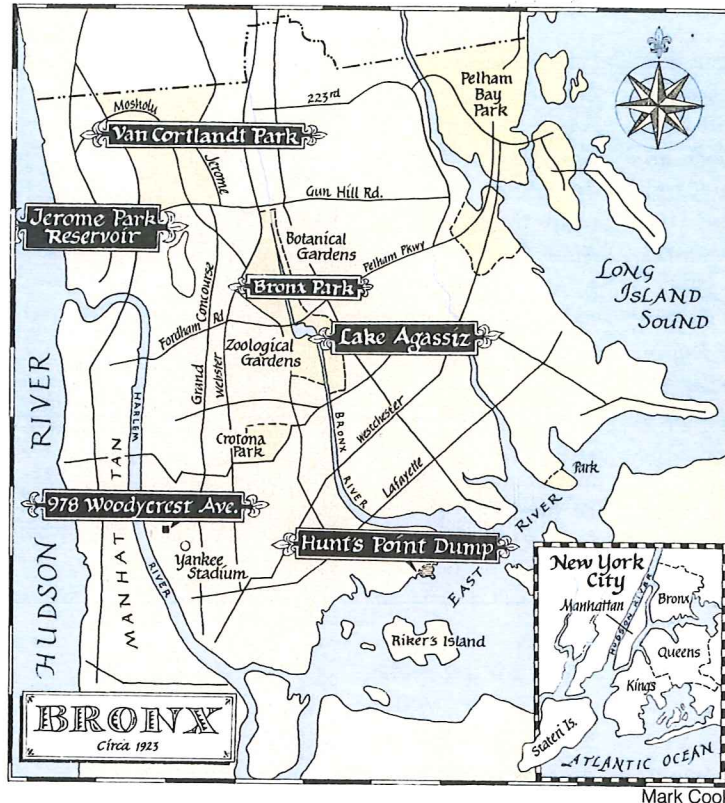
"And wasn't it Cruickshank who had a King Rail's nest in Van Cortlandt Park?"

"The Kuerzi brothers got a Black-backed Woodpecker at the Botanical Gardens every year..."

"And the Black Rail we flushed on Long Island, do you remember that one?"

The tiny revolution in the twenties, in the Bronx, led by the young men who Sewall Pettingill would later fondly remember as "a terror to

all timid birdwatchers who crossed their path," seemed to be lost amid the noisier social rebellions of the period. But the reverberations of that uprising have lasted to mold, mobilize and challenge millions of modern birders. 



The map above, based on Bronx maps of the twenties, highlights the Bronx County Bird Club's favorite birding hot spots.

## Good Reading

*A Guide to Bird Watching*, Joseph J. Hickey, Oxford University Press, 1943.

*A World of Watchers*, Joseph Kastner, Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

*Birds Around New York City*, Allan Cruickshank, 1942.

*Birds Over America*, Roger Tory Peterson, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1950.

*The Bird Watcher's America*, Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., McGraw-Hill, 1965.

ow and partner, a gifted photographer, was inducted as the club's first female member, bringing the total attendance to seven.

This reunion was held in high form, the members making ornithological presentations. Cruickshank