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# Dr. Hickey's Advice: A Former Student Remembers

by Eduardo Santana C.

**I** was born in Havana, Cuba. At the age of four my family moved to Puerto Rico, where I grew up. My sensitivity to nature came from my mother and father, although neither was educated in the natural sciences.

My mother was raised in the Cuban countryside, in a dirt-floor house surrounded by chickens, hogs, and horses. She often would tell me beautiful and exciting stories of life in the country. My father was a building contractor and would take my friends and me tromping through the woods whenever he had to check the location for a new road or bridge. My parents taught me few facts about the natural world, but they did teach me to love it.

At the age of seventeen, in 1974, I moved to Madison to attend college. I had graduated from a small high school of about 350 students, and most of what I knew about wildlife ecology at the time I had learned from television shows like "Wild Kingdom" and "The Wonderful World of Disney."

The University of Wisconsin seemed like a huge monster to me. During the first semester, I had a bad experience with a professor who, when I asked him a question after class, told me that I did not belong in college. He simply did not understand the needs of a young, inexperienced foreigner. I decided to search for other career alternatives.

One day, I consulted my advisor, a medical student. He suggested that I talk with Professor Joe Hickey whose wildlife ecology course he had taken as an elective. He said he had enjoyed it very much, had met his wife in the course, and Hickey had attended his wedding. My advisor was black, so at least I figured Hickey wasn't racist, an important consideration inasmuch as I had had some ugly experiences in Madison.

Joe Hickey and I got along well right away, and he agreed to be my advisor when I transferred to wildlife ecology. He also gave me some advice: "Don't worry about what one professor told you. Stay after class and pester your professors with good questions. Make sure that you understand everything." A few



Joseph Hickey in the field.

weeks later I was officially an undergraduate student in the Department of Wildlife Ecology. At that time I didn't even know who Aldo Leopold was.

The following semester I took Hickey's wildlife ecology course. He always started the class with recordings of bird songs that he often imitated by whistling while tilting his head sideways back and forth. He also explained the context in which the birds sang. Often he would have mammal and bird skins on a table so students could get some hands-on experience, and he used many color slides during lectures. His course was sometimes criticized for not being technical enough, yet I now see

## Joe Hickey and The Bronx Boys

by Roger Tory Peterson

I first met Joe Hickey nearly seventy years ago, and he became one of my dearest friends. I would not have written my field guides had it not been for Joe and the Bronx Boys. How these nine teenage boys of various ethnic and social origins, living in various parts of the Bronx, found each other, heaven knows. They organized themselves as the Bronx County Bird Club, and Joe Hickey became the permanent secretary. The official membership stayed at nine for years, but they had started a revolution. I was the first outlander—the first non-Bronx member.

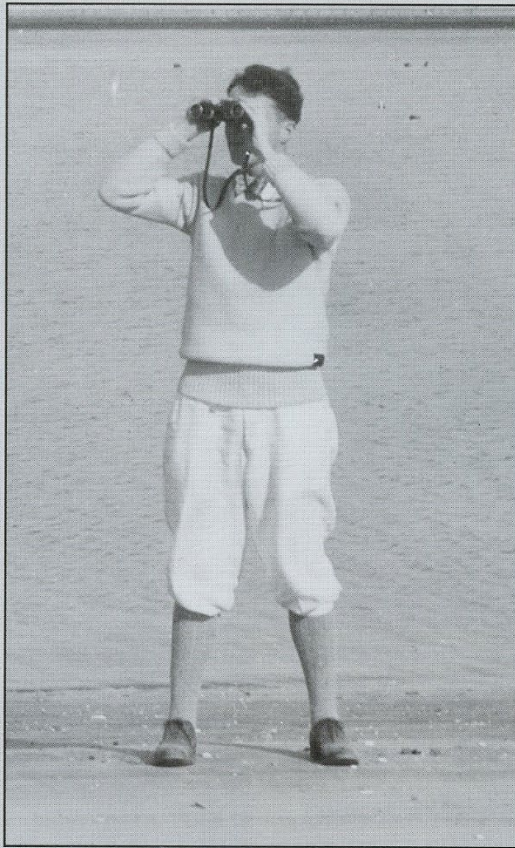
Those days I spent around New York with the members of the Bronx County Bird Club were wonderful. From them I learned the tricks of the trade, and being trained as an artist, I was able to pull things together and give them visual form. This led to my first field guide to the birds.

Joe was birding on his own when he was twelve and, lacking glasses, he used to climb a tall maple tree to see warblers close up. He was thirteen years, ten months old—he remembered the big day exactly—when some kind gentleman he had met near the Bronx Zoo gave him an old pair of opera glasses. That started him on the road to sophisticated bird-watching. Like so many gifted people whom I have known, his spirit soared highest on the wings of birds.

The generation that Joe and the Bronx County Bird Club represented became the focal point of the birding movement. The Linnaean Society was their base and source of influence. In 1943 Joe Hickey's *Guide to Bird Watching* was published, and he became a tremendously influential conservationist, especially when he moved to Wisconsin to work with Aldo Leopold and then to succeed him, culminating in his work on DDT, peregrines, and other raptors. Hundreds of Joe's students have moved into and built up the structures of modern conservation and environmental studies.

Joe knew the meaning of conservation: the value of birds, animals, forests, waters, and soil; the joy and well-being to be found in their study and contemplation. He felt it was a sacred responsibility to pass these things on to the future.

*Roger Tory Peterson is author of the Peterson field guides to birds.*



Joe Hickey in 1929, age 22.

his objectives. In addition to providing the basics of wildlife ecology to majors, he had designed his course to serve as a motivational experience for non-majors, helping to raise concern about environmental issues and promoting activism in nature conservation. (We have come full circle and now see the need for that type of course in college curricula.)

Every day, following his early advice, I stayed after class to ask him questions. Some of my questions might have been interesting, but most, I now realize, revealed my complete ignorance of wildlife and nature in general. Despite this, Hickey never discouraged me from continuing in the wildlife field. However, he did seem a little distressed one day when I solemnly asked him, "Dr. Hickey, what is a thistle?" and he replied, "Of all the city boys I know, you're the cityboyest." Not the best compliment for a student who wanted to live out in the wilderness and study wolves and eagles.

That semester came and went. I received an A in his class and earned A's in most of my other classes as well. However, at the age of nineteen, new experiences touched my life and the lives of friends close to me: strange cultures, strange religions, racism, love, sex, rape, homosexuality, drugs, alcoholism, imperialism, and armed struggle for liberation. All of a sudden, studying wildlife did not seem to be all that relevant. There were too many problems to solve in the world and not enough time. Worst of all, I understood little about the world, which I felt I had to change. I was learning new things and experiencing new feelings so fast that I couldn't process everything. I needed time to think.

So, I began thinking—and as sometimes happens with students who spend time thinking, I began flunking most of my classes. I finally decided to go and chat with Dr. Hickey. For about twenty minutes I

paced back and forth in his office, giving him a long dissertation about social injustice and human suffering and how I needed to do something about it. I told him I didn't care that I was flunking most of my courses.

I was sure my presentation was going to ignite a complex and stimulating discussion of the biologist's role in abolishing social injustice—discussions similar to those I had been having with friends at the Memorial Union, the 602 Club, and the Cardinal Bar. But all Hickey said was, "I think you're burned out. You've been working too hard." He didn't talk about politics or sociology. He said he would play his role *in loco parentis* and was pragmatic about the whole situation.

Again, he offered some advice: "If you don't care about school then drop out. No sense to waste your time. Maybe you will have wasted your money, but let's make sure those F's stay off your record by dropping out early. Second, let's get you a job in a wildlife refuge where you can get some experience and can decide if wildlife ecology is the field for you." So he made one phone call and immediately got me a position as a technician with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



I was assigned to the Chatauqua National Wildlife Refuge in Illinois, part of the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge. When Hickey learned where I was going, he told me that he had a friend who worked near that refuge. "Do you know who Frank Bellrose is?" Hickey asked. "Nope," I answered. He rolled his eyes (again!) and took me into the library and showed me a whole collection of scientific articles on waterfowl written by Bellrose. I did not know it, but Hickey then called Bellrose and asked him to take care of me.

Bellrose was the first person with whom I went bird-watching for shorebirds, and he set me up to work with biologists at the Illinois Natural History Survey. The summer experience had its ups and downs, but it served to get my thoughts and feelings in focus again. I learned what it was that I wanted to get out of college, and, more vaguely, out of life.

I returned to Madison feeling I owed my life to Joe Hickey, and I told him so. I also told him I didn't know how I could ever pay him back for all the help he had given me. He answered by giving me still more advice: "Some day you will be in a position similar to mine. And when you get to that point, you will have the opportunity to help others. And every time you help another person, you will be paying me back for the help I gave you." That was one of the most important lessons of my life, one that I have never forgotten, and one that I have taught all my students in Mexico.

Although I owe much to various mentors and friends in my career, I might never have become a biologist had Joe Hickey not had the sensitivity to understand me and help keep me on track during those early years. I eventually graduated "with distinction" and went on to work for the U.S. Forest Service on the conservation of the critically-endangered Puerto Rican parrot.

When I returned to school for a master's degree, Hickey, although retired, was there to share his wisdom. He gave me advice like, "Always discuss your research project. You will think of things while you're talking that you will not think in silence. Ask fellow students and colleagues for their opinions and criticism." He steered me through the university bureaucracy and politics and wrote important letters of recommendation.

The last formal bit of advice Dr. Hickey gave me was in 1985. I had just received my master's degree and was leaving for west-central Mexico to help create a biosphere reserve in a remote mountain range. Other professor friends gave me practical advice about meeting the new challenges I was going to face in my first professional job. Not Hickey. He told me, "First, find the right woman and get married. Women have been very important in my life. Second, get your union card—in our business, this means get your Ph.D."



Some say Dr. Hickey's greatest contribution was his work on DDT and the conservation of the peregrine falcon. Others say it was his novel use of bird band return data to conduct life-table analyses. Still others say it was his leadership in conservation organizations like the Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy. I, however, feel that his greatest contributions came in his role as a teacher and advisor. At the beginning of each semester you could easily identify Dr. Hickey's office. It was the one with a crowd of undergraduate students waiting in line to talk with him.

In unquantifiable ways, he helped many young students and biologists at crucial times in their academic and professional careers. If only a fraction of those he helped are now following his advice of helping others, then his goodwill is spreading widely, making this a much better world. ♣

*These excerpts were taken from readings given on September 5, 1993, at a memorial service in Madison for Professor Joseph Hickey (1907–1993), who was a long-time member of the Wisconsin Academy.*

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*"Joe Hickey's greatest striving was to be a good teacher. It was also his greatest success professionally. He worked with exceptional zeal and dedication in preparing his classroom presentations . . . The students responded with enthusiasm."*  
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