

Tributes to Chandler S. Robbins

Additional Chandler S. Robbins tributes and reflections online: aba.org/birding/2012-september

Birding magazine has asked various folks to share brief reflections on Chan Robbins—how he has influenced their own lives and careers, as well as his legacy for all birders.

On a sweltering 100-degree day in 1992, I waded through seemingly impenetrable briar-choked woodland to the first point count. I was 17 and field hardened, but these conditions gave me concern for the “other observer” I met there, clearly in his seventies. An eight-hour lesson in humility ensued, culminating in a realization that this guy’s made out of leather and tougher than nails! It’s that kind of fortitude that’s made Chan Robbins so successful, but it’s his attention to the fundamentals that makes his accomplishments so enduring—each born of considerable forethought for what different counting methods produce, before counting begins.

—**Dave Ziolkowski Jr.**

DZ is Program Ornithologist with the North American Breeding Bird Survey.

My earliest memories of Chan are of this easy, incredibly well-respected, crew-cut man, in charge of the banding station on Maryland’s eastern shore in the early 1960s, holding a Connecticut Warbler, explaining to the five-year-old how it differed from a Mourning Warbler. On the next net run, my father captured another Connecticut, and I eagerly repeated Chan’s words, to my dad’s disbelief. Through those early days of banding, Christmas Bird Counts, and Breeding Bird Surveys, Chan always encouraged me toward ornithology, at the time a career choice only for eccentrics. Without his encouragement, I would not be where I am today.

—**Peter Pyle**

PP is a biologist with the California-based Institute for Bird Populations.

Chan Robbins’ leadership in establishing the Breeding Bird Survey is a gift to our younger generation, whether they are fortunate enough to be birders or not. This long-standing “health test” for birds, indeed for our environment in general, is crucial for understanding how new diseases, climate change, and habitat loss are impacting the world around us. For many North Americans, the work of counting birds goes on behind the scenes, but all of us benefit from the insights and environmental policy changes that result from keeping close tabs on these modern-day canaries in the coal mine.

—**Bridget Stutchbury**

BS is Professor of Biology at York University and author of *Silence of the Songbirds*.

Chan Robbins is a man whose research has integrated natural history and ecology, a person who understands that knowledge and appreciation of nature go together. He is also equal-

ly committed as a teacher of ecology and natural history. Thirty years ago I worked for him on his famous forest fragmentation study. I was one of the many recent high school grads over the years who helped with this project and whose science careers were molded by Chan. He understands that his job is to study the natural world he loves and to help create the next generation who will love and study it.

—**Manuel Lerdau**

ML is Professor of Environmental Sciences and Biology at the University of Virginia.

The 1966 *Golden Guide*, my first field guide, holds a special place in my heart, primarily because of the lasting impact of that book’s use of sound spectrograms. I’ll never forget the experience of first seeing the quirky Pied-billed Grebe spectrograph on page 20! Here was a new way to consider sound, a critically important aid for understanding and identifying birds. Sadly, the novelty of reproducing spectrograms did not catch on at the time. Nevertheless, this guide remains an inspiration for today’s ornithological pioneers, who are using sound to revolutionize the study and conservation of birds.

—**Andrew Farnsworth**

AF conducts research on flight calls and nocturnal migration at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Although I have not had the pleasure of personally knowing Mr. Robbins, his work has been of great interest and influence to me, particularly recently. I work with a nonprofit organization that identifies valuable urban green spaces and protects them. We use Breeding Bird Survey and Maryland Breeding Bird Atlas information to help assign priority scores to the species we find, and to understand their overall conservation picture within our state. Without these tools that Mr. Robbins developed and contributed to, we would have to struggle to make judgments that, because of these tools, come easily to us.

—**Mike Hudson**

Sixteen-year-old **MH** is a junior at Baltimore City College High School.

Chan has been a visionary, seeing value in recording and saving data. Long ago, I worked on a project to create a database of Chan’s Laysan and Black-footed albatross bandings and encounters from Midway Island in the 1950s and 1960s. He could recall study areas on Midway as though he’d been on the island a few years ago instead of decades earlier. Chan’s meticulous records made this data of importance to seabird biologists decades later. A personal anecdote: In my last year at Patuxent, I remember looking out my window to see Chan running down a rain-slick grassy hill between buildings; I’m

delighted, but not surprised, that he's still going strong at 94.

—**Mary Gustafson**

MG is Rio Grande Joint Venture Coordinator with the American Bird Conservancy.

Conocí al Dr. Chandler S. Robbins en 1993, en el oriente tropical de Guatemala, y a raíz de ese encuentro mi carrera en la ornitología tomó un camino del cual nunca me aparté. El conocimiento enciclopédico de Chan de las aves me impresionó profundamente, pero lo que más admiré de él era su disposición y humildad para compartir este conocimiento. Entre 1994 y 2001, tuve el inmenso privilegio de compartir muchas horas en el campo con él, donde pacientemente me entrenó a mí y a muchos estudiantes de biología en las técnicas de monitoreo de aves. También discutimos profundamente diversos temas, desde la historia natural de las aves hasta conceptos ecológicos más complejos como la fragmentación de hábitat y la conservación de la biodiversidad. No tengo duda de que Chan Robbins, al cual orgullosamente considero mi mentor e influencia vital, es uno de los mayores contribuyentes a la conservación de las aves y a la ciencia de la biología de la conservación en América.

—**Alexis Cerezo**

AC is a quantitative ecologist with appointments in Guatemala and Argentina.

I was a young teenager, and I'd written the famous scientist, coauthor of my favorite library book, *Birds of Maryland and the District of Columbia*. The famous author replied and said that the book was out of print and that he and his wife, Eleanor, had no more copies, but, he added, I should come to the bird club meetings. Which I did. There I saw the blending of passion and profession where boundaries between those who are scientists and those who are not are blurred. I and others took that gift in.

—**Sam Droege**

SD is with the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, where he designs survey programs for animals.

I don't remember when I first met Chan Robbins, but I remember his big smile and how friendly and welcoming he was. And in due course, Chan would have a defining impact on the direction of my research. In 1979, I was a new graduate student, and a workshop proceedings with a paper by Chan Robbins titled "Effects of forest fragmentation on bird populations" had just been published. Chan introduced the idea that cowbirds significantly affect populations of songbirds breeding in forest interiors. That paper was the origin of my re-

search on forest fragmentation and the beginning of a research theme I still follow today.

—**Margaret Brittingham**

MB is Professor of Wildlife Resources at Penn State University.

Although Chan is well known as a fixture in the bird community for being a tireless biologist, field guide author, and all-around gentleman, he is best known in conservation circles for his creation and championing of the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) in 1966. This very simple, yet revolutionary idea grew into the most important program for tracking the population trends of hundreds of widespread bird species, over more than four decades and at a scale not repeated anywhere else in the world. The BBS has played a major role in guiding policy and science in the U.S. and elsewhere. Chan remains humble about his contributions to ornithology and conservation, but they are indeed great.

—**Ken Rosenberg**

KR is with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Partners in Flight.

I was stunned and honored when I heard I had received an award named for one of the most influential ornithologists alive. Of course, Chan Robbins' legacy is international in scope: Consider the North American Breeding Survey, the innovative *Golden Guide Birds of North America*, and Robbins' work on the effects of DDT. His legacy has also been personal: Over the past 15 years, Robbins has been an inspiration to the Virginia-based Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's membership and a guide to us in our work to protect the birds of Loudoun County, where much is at stake in one of North America's fastest-growing jurisdictions.

—**Joseph Coleman**

JC, recipient of the ABA's 2012 Chandler S. Robbins Award, is Founder and Past President of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy.

The first field guide I ever owned was Chan Robbins' *Golden Guide*. Chan was also the first birding giant I ever met, years later at Hawk Mountain. He was signing copies of his guide, and I stood in line, secretly mortified by the condition of my copy. It had fallen in innumerable marshes and creeks, been dried out overnight in the oven, its cracked spine sewed together with heavy thread, scribbled in, and underscored. But when I handed it to Chan with muttered apologies, he beamed that thousand-watt smile of his, held up my battered field guide, and said with undisguised delight, "This is a book that's been used!"

—**Scott Weidensaul**

SW is the author of *Living on the Wind* and other major works on birds.