

In Memoriam: Philip Crutchfield¹

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People are always giving me things having to do with birds, some more useful than others. And sometimes, what looks at first to be trash, turns out to be treasure. Once, a friend gave me an old field guide that had belonged to her grandmother. Other than the provenance, the book was nothing special; I already had several similar copies. But secreted inside the pages was a forty-year-old, yellowed copy of Doris Hauser's newspaper column. I had never seen it before, and it became an impetus for this column, with the same name, in Mrs. Hauser's honor.

Another time I got a box of old bird magazines. There were no tangible objects tucked away inside, just a lot of old information. I read them anyway. They proved to be a treasure map.

I had never seen one of the magazines, a journal of unusual sightings called *Audubon Field Notes*. (It has changed names several times; now it's called *North American Birds*.) Its content came from birders from around North America, who submitted notable birds by snail mail to regional editors for possible inclusion in the magazine. Six months later when the magazine came out, the birding community would get to read what you and everyone else had seen two seasons before. Of course, my copies were much older. I was learning what people had found years before.

Each sighting recorded the bird, a general location, and the date. At the end of the record, the editors put the initials of the person who had submitted it. Every issue had at least one report of an incredible find in or near Fayetteville, and always by PJC. Philip J. Crutchfield.

Who was Mr. Crutchfield? And how did he find such great birds?

Later, I subscribed to the magazine and discovered that PJC was not just a name from the past. Each quarterly issue had his reports. He saw birds that I had hardly heard of at the time, and he was seeing them in Cumberland County. Anhinga. Wood stork. Western Kingbird. I looked up his telephone number and almost called him, but I did not.

One late fall afternoon, I was standing beside Forest Lake (Clark's Pond, really) trying to identify some distant ducks. A man walked up, binoculars in hand, and started to do the same. We talked a little, but all the while he looked for birds. Up. Down. He put his binoculars on everything remotely avian.

At some point I saw it. I do not recall if it was a monogrammed shirt or eyeglass case or whether he had just painted the initials on his binoculars,

¹ Reprinted with permission from the column "About Birds" in *The Fayetteville Observer*, 8 September 2009. Philip Crutchfield was a long-time member of the Carolina Bird Club and regular contributor to *The Chat*, both in Briefs for the Files and as author of field notes, and he served as secretary and as a member-at-large on the executive committee of the club.

but there it was, "PJC." It was a Livingstone/Stanley moment for me, and I said something ineloquent, like, "You're Philip J. Crutchfield." He agreed that he was, and our friendship began.

Appreciation

Phil introduced me to places in Cumberland County that I had never known. Even familiar spots revealed themselves anew through his eyes. He was an ecologist, and I began to think a bit like one too, albeit without the formal scientific education. I began to understand why we saw certain types of living things in certain places. I started to appreciate the cycles of nature and the timing of migration. I heard—I wished I could say I learned—the names of hundreds of grasses, wildflowers, vines, shrubs, and trees. I saw firsthand the negative impact of poorly planned and poorly executed development. I saw environmental degradation and the beauty that remains. But, most of all, we found birds.

We birded River Road and Becker's Sand & Gravel. We tromped around millponds, swamps, fields, and streams. We birded from his car and on foot in parks and on roadsides. Phil birded every day, at least a little. On weekends or evenings after work, I went with him when I could. I wish I had gone more often.

I do not know how many species on my life list that Phil helped me find. Certainly, he was with me when I saw most of the more than 200 different species I have identified in Cumberland County. The observational skills he taught me and the disciplined approach he modeled are responsible for the rest. If I have passed on anything worthwhile in this column [About Birds] over the last 10 years, it probably had its genesis in something Phil passed on to me.

Philip James Crutchfield died last month. I treasure my memories of my friend and teacher.