

Remembering Chandler Robbins and how he influenced bird banding and bird banders

When great people die, their greatness lives long in written history, as they are recognized and remembered for their legacy of accomplishment. When dear people die, their dearness lives on for a while in the hearts and minds of those who knew and loved them, and for a very few, perhaps longer in memoirs or biographies.

Chandler Robbins was both great and dear. Ornithological history will record his greatness, and indeed, much has already been written of his accomplishments. It will, however, be up to those who knew him personally to memorialize his dearness, for although he wrote much about his activities (his four page, small font, single-spaced Christmas letters come to mind), Chan was too selfless and unassuming to write much about himself. Someday, perhaps someone will compile a comprehensive biography of Chan that does justice to both his greatness and dearness, but for now, at the 2017 EBBA meeting, let us simply reflect on how the melding of the two influenced bird banding and bird banders.

My acquaintance with Chan began with seeing his name as author of the classic field guide, *Birds of North America* when I was a graduate student at Utah State University in 1969. I was assisting my advisor conducting a Breeding Bird survey route in a remote area of Utah. My advisor was an authority on waterfowl, but neither of us was good at identifying nongame birds, so we relied heavily on Chan's guide. I still remember confirming, yes, that's a Sage Sparrow. I would not realize for a few more years, that not only were we relying on Chan's guide to conduct the survey, it was actually his survey!

That realization came in early 1974 when I began working as a junior biologist at the Bird Banding Lab at Patuxent and got to meet Chan. I had only been there a few days when fellow biologist Jay Sheppard invited me to join him and Chan on an outing to search for Black Rails. We went to Sandy Point State Park and called up a couple that came out of the marsh grass right at our feet. They were the first and only Black Rails I have ever seen.

The early 1970s at Patuxent were heady days for young biologists who saw themselves as "new school". Patuxent was the world center for the emerging field of quantitative ecology, and new school, statistician-type biologists were developing new statistical models for analyzing bird banding data. It seemed that "old school," naturalist-type biologists like Chan, who had been there since the 1940s, might fade into the background. Indeed in 1974, with his age and years of service, Chan would have been very close to qualifying for retirement, if not already eligible. But to the betterment of us all - birds, bird banders and the banding program - Chan did not retire. In fact, Chan was still productively employed when I retired as Chief of the BBL in 2002. He just kept on doing good work.

In those years between my arrival at Patuxent as rookie biologist and my departure as BBL Chief I came to realize how much Chan influenced bird banding and bird banders. Chan had an incomparable institutional memory of the program. He was personally acquainted with Paul Bartsch who did the first scientific bird banding in North America in 1902, and, in the 1940s at the banding office, Chan worked for Frederick Lincoln who in 1920 had founded the banding program as we know it today. When you wanted to know what happened when with the banding program, you went to Chan.

Chan got a banding permit early in his career and eventually became the longest running bander in the history of the program, personally banding tens of thousands of birds, among them in 1956, the famous

Laysan Albatross, Wisdom that is the longest living wild bird known to man. Into his 90s, Chan operated a banding program at his home, documenting decades of change in bird populations in a suburban setting.

Chan was generous in sharing data, and, being patient and gracious, he was easy to work with. Some of those “new school” biologists came to realize that Chan not only had useful data, he had valuable insights gained through years of field work and observation, insights helpful to statisticians when it came to making assumptions about data. He earned their respect, and many fruitful collaborations resulted.

Chan was a leader of other banders. He was active in the regional banding associations. He founded Operation Recovery which led to the establishment many long-term migration monitoring stations, some of which continue today. He taught countless other banders through writing and workshops. He mentored many who over the years would become expert banders themselves, in turn influencing bird banding: Kathy Klimkiewicz, Danny Bystrak, and Peter Pyle come to mind, but surely there are others.

If he was a great ornithologist and bird bander, Chan was an even greater person. His character had a profound influence on people, and in turn, the projects and programs they worked on. The more you came to know him, the more you came to respect and admire Chan. He was ever positive and inspiring. By his example, and with his wisdom, he tempered people, making them better human beings. Chan was a friend to all. I never heard him say anything bad about anybody. He was the kindest man I ever met.

I was thinking about all that that when I saw Chan at the 2010 EBBA meeting where he had been invited to give a talk about his decades of backyard banding. From a wheel chair, he spoke softly and slowly, without the vigor and enthusiasm of his usual presentations. It was still a good talk, but it left me sad thinking that I might be seeing his last public appearance as a speaker.

Five months later, tears of joy came to my eyes when I saw Chan walk down the aisle at the opening of the International Ornithological Congress in Brazil. He was back in action, attending sessions, presenting a talk, and mingling with colleagues from around the world. It was interesting to see many of the world's foremost ornithologists come forward to pay him homage. We tend to think of Chan in the familiar contexts of Patuxent, Maryland and the U.S., but he indeed was world class.

After the IOC, Chan kept going. In 2011, at the symposium celebrating the 75th anniversary of Patuxent, he gave a magnificent presentation on early avian studies at Patuxent. Although he was at the center of most of those early studies, in his characteristically selfless manner, Chan gave much credit to others. Chan's presentation forms a chapter in the recently published book *The history of Patuxent—America's wildlife research story*. The chapter contains much about Chan's involvement in bird banding. See: https://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1422/circ1422_1-earlyyears.pdf

Remarkably, and quite clearly, for some 70 years Chandler Robbins had a major, positive influence on the North American bird banding program, in turn greatly enhancing bird conservation. Many owe him a debt of gratitude for having enriched their professional and personal lives. May they follow Chan's example and through their continuing good works, carry forth his legacy.

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PS. At this 2017 meeting of the Eastern Bird Banding Association, let us also take a few moments to remember George Jonkel, another bander who for many years served and influenced the North American bird banding program. Born in 1927, George passed away on Nov. 20, 2016. George was the 5th Chief of the Bird Banding Laboratory, serving from 1971 to 1989. He was a staunch supporter of bird banders and banding organizations like EBBA. He also worked with ornithologists in Brazil, India and China, helping establish their banding programs.