



BIRDSCOPE

News and Views from Sapsucker Woods ➤ Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Passing the Torch

BY TIM GALLAGHER

Charles Walcott retires as Lab director

When Charlie Walcott became director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 1981, he agreed to stay here for at least five years. He had no idea how much longer his tenure would be; Walcott found the work of the Lab so engrossing and challenging that he stayed on for more than 14 years. Now, as he retires from his position as the Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director, Charlie reminisces on his career and his years at the Lab.

"I was a Cornell graduate student in 1956 when the Lab opened," says Walcott. "It was a lovely spot. A bunch of us would come out here each week for the Monday Night Seminar."

Years later, in the early 1980s, when Walcott was a professor of animal behavior at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, he heard that the Lab was searching for a new director. He was already involved in bird research and was well known for his studies of the navigational abilities of homing pigeons, but he decided to apply for the position. When asked by the interview committee what he thought of the Laboratory of Ornithology and what changes he

would make, Walcott boldly laid out his plans for the future. As a long-term goal, he envisioned creating an institution that would perform important research on every aspect of bird study—natural history, physiology, behavior, population dynamics, vocalizations—but would also reach out to the public, educating people about birds and the need to conserve them.

The first step, he told them, would be to change *The Living Bird* from an annual scientific publication into a quarterly magazine aimed at a popular audience. "I thought if we had a magazine that appealed to a broader audience we could attract more members and more people to participate in our research," says Walcott. The Lab's administrative board appointed Walcott to be director, giving him a mandate to put his changes into effect. A short time later, *The Living Bird Quarterly* was launched and, as Walcott predicted, Lab membership soared, rising quickly from 1,500 to 10,000 members. (Membership currently stands at more than 22,000.)

Over the years, the number of volunteer-assisted programs has grown and is still going up. This



Charlie Walcott takes a morning bird walk beside the Lab pond. Walcott will remain at Cornell University as a professor and researcher.

past year we ran Project Feeder-Watch, the Seed Preference Test, Project Tanager, a pilot study of Project PigeonWatch, and a House Finch disease survey, all of which involved data gathered by Lab members and friends across the continent. And we plan to have many more such programs in the future.

"The secret to the Lab's success, if there is one," says Walcott, "is the combination of solid research and the participation of birders. That's what has made all our projects so exciting. It's not make-work, it's not a laboratory exercise, it's not trying to answer a question that we already know the answer to," he says. "We're trying to gather information that will help us to learn more about birds. Whether that be to find out more about the behavior and

population dynamics of Rock Doves in the city, to study the nesting success of tanagers in forest fragments of various sizes, or to monitor the spread of conjunctivitis in House Finches, we're employing amateur ornithologists to gather important data. It's real research and I think that's exciting. And it's good ➤

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TIM GALLAGHER



The View from Sapsucker Woods

This summer I will move from Sapsucker Woods to the Cornell University campus. I leave the Lab with mixed feelings. I'll miss the wonderful staff, the interactions with the Administrative Board, and I'll miss you, Lab members and volunteers. But I look forward to returning to teaching and research in the Section of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell.

The Lab I leave is far different from what it was 14 years ago when I came. The number of staff, the size of the budget, and the programs themselves have all grown. Membership has increased from fewer than 2,000 to more than 20,000. And more and more folks, both birders and professional ornithologists, are working together on bird research and conservation.

The Lab has become an exciting place, firmly rooted in the academic structure of Cornell and yet increasingly effective at recruiting birders to work with us as partners in research. This success is the result of an active collaboration between you, our staff, and our Administrative Board. The greatest tribute to our joint accomplishments is that we have been able to attract a scientist, conservationist, and leader of the stature of our new Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director, John Fitzpatrick.

As I leave the staff to become a Lab volunteer and member, I want to pay special tribute to all of you—board members, staff, Lab members, and volunteers—for all that you have done to make the Lab a unique and effective organization. Thank you for the rewarding experience that you have given me.

Charles Walcott

Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director

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for everyone involved. We end up with a major study on tanagers that has 1,000 data points instead of 20 or 30, and the participants learn more about birds and the scientific process."

If you look at Walcott's entire career, it's not surprising that he would choose to push the Lab simultaneously toward public outreach and scientific research. He has managed over the years to divide his career between public education and academia. While he was still an undergraduate at Harvard in the mid-1950s, Walcott helped to produce a series of science programs for public television.

At that time, most television shows were live. "We did things like having moths hatch on cue. So you had to arrange it so that the moth hatched out during the half hour of the show, and preferably within a ten-minute segment." Walcott also made a film, of a spider spinning its web, which won a prestigious Sylvania Award. He later worked on another television series called "Exploring Nature," which was aimed at fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade elementary school students. And he was a consultant for the popular television series, "Nova," for which he produced a couple of programs about birds.

It was a natural progression for Charlie Walcott to come to the Lab and initiate the kind of programs we have now, enlisting amateurs in the study of birds. "The thing I believe in most strongly is that you learn by being involved," he says. "If you talk with birders, you find that one of the things they enjoy doing is keeping lists of the birds they've seen. So I thought, great, let's take that ability and see what we can do with it in terms of science. What we've done is to build on their interest and try to employ it in research."

Has Charlie Walcott accomplished all his personal goals at the Lab? "Never," he says. "But I think I've done what I can and now it's time for someone else to take the next steps." The Lab has grown immensely during Walcott's tenure here. The staff has increased five- or six-fold, the Lab's budget has increased by 10 times, the number of people involved in our programs has grown astronomically, and public recognition of our work has never been higher.

"We've built a great team here," says Walcott. "Everyone has worked together—the staff, the administrative board, and the members. That's the thing that's been most exciting. It's nothing that I've done myself, it's what everyone has accomplished together. We have a dynamite group. I would characterize my own accomplishment as being one of showing the great potential of the Lab and the concept of amateur participation in meaningful scientific research."

What are Charlie Walcott's plans for his own future? "I'll be going back to teaching and research as a professor in Cornell's Section of Neurobiology and Behavior," he says. "I'll probably continue my research on loons and animal navigation."

All of us at the Lab thank Charlie for his support and guidance over the years, and we wish him well in all his future endeavors. ■



Fitzpatrick is New Director

John Fitzpatrick is the Lab's new Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director. Fitzpatrick, formerly director of Florida's Archbold Biological Station, takes the helm at the Lab this summer.