Obituary

Chandler Seymour Robbins (1918–2017)

Chandler Seymour Robbins, one of the most widely admired and internationally respected field ornithologists, died in Laurel, Maryland, on 20 March 2017, at the age of 98. A modest man, he will be fondly remembered for his many achievements and his lifelong dedication to studies of birds and their habitats.

Of his hundreds of publications, the best known is *Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification*, coauthored with Bertel Bruun, illustrated by Arthur Singer, and edited by Herbert Zim, published in 1966 and revised in 1983. This ‘Golden Guide’, with its opposing range maps, sonograms and plates comparing similar birds, set new standards for field guides. More than six million copies have been sold.

Born in Belmont, Massachusetts, on 17 July 1918, Chan was birding by the age of 12. Before he had completed his undergraduate studies at Harvard University in 1940, his advisor, the legendary birder Ludlow Griscom, warned him against ornithology as a career choice, citing the paucity of opportunities. But in 1945 Frederick Lincoln invited Chan to join the Bird-Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That position also allowed him to work toward a Masters degree at George Washington University, which he received in 1950. In 1948, he married Eleanor Cooley, with whom he had two sons and two daughters. The Patuxent Wildlife Research Center served as Chan’s base for a 60-year career in public service, from which he retired in 2005 at the age of 87.

Chan wanted everyone to become better educated about birds because such knowledge can inspire an appreciation of wildlife and a commitment to its conservation. He worked tirelessly with local, regional, national, and international groups to compile data and standardize field methods. In his lifetime and with his helpers, he ringed more than 450 species of birds in the United States, Canada, Central America, and the Caribbean. He participated in more than 400 Christmas Bird Counts.

Starting in 1956, Chan made 10 trips to Midway Atoll to study seabirds. One of the many Laysan Albatrosses *Phoebastria immutabilis* he ringed that year had a chick and must have been at least 7 years old. On his last trip in 2002, he re-ringed the same bird a quarter of a mile away, sitting on an egg. In December 2016 that bird, now at least 66 years old, was seen to be rearing a chick. It is now the oldest known wild bird in the world, and holds the record for the longest reproductive life. Chan and his colleagues showed that by modifying the dunes and thereby the updrafts, the naval air base on the atoll could coexist with the seabirds.

Chan was a major contributor to the National Audubon Society’s Breeding Bird Census and Winter Bird-Population Study, methods for mapping birds in gridded habitats, modeled after the Common Birds Census in the UK that had been run by the BTO since the early 1960s. His results contributed to more synthetic works like his summary with Robert Stewart of the avifauna of Maryland and the District of Columbia. He adapted breeding bird atlas methods developed in Britain for regional summaries in the USA and served as
senior editor for the atlas of the breeding birds of
the same area. Another early cooperative project
was Operation Recovery, a program begun in the
1950s to net and ring birds during autumn migra-
tion at coastal sites along the eastern seaboard of
North America.

From 1961 to 1974 Chan served as Chief of
the Migratory Nongame Bird Studies Section of
the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a unit that is
now under the U.S. Geological Survey. During
that time, with his detailed knowledge of the dis-
tribution and habitat requirements of birds in the
mid-Atlantic states, especially in landscapes that
combined agriculture and woodlots, Chan devel-
oped his concept of forest fragmentation – that
some forest interior birds were excluded from
small woodlots by their size. That idea became an
important paradigm in the field of conservation
biology, although its link to the theory of island
biogeography was a stretch.

Chan’s concern about the effects of pesticides
on bird populations was part of the impetus for
his design of the most ambitious citizen science
program of all, the North American Breeding Bird
Survey (BBS). It involved point counts, which had
been developed in France. A volunteer workforce
of skilled birders, who loved their cars, would
drive along a 24.5-mile prescribed route 1 day in
June and stop every half-mile for a 3-min point
count of birds seen and heard. By 1968 this pro-
ject had nearly 2000 routes throughout the USA
and Canada. Now administered by Patuxent, Envi-
ronment Canada’s Canadian Wildlife Service, and
Mexico’s CONABIO (National Commission
for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity), this
Breeding Bird Survey assesses the status and
trends of bird populations on a truly continental
scale (https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/bbsnews/
Pubs/Birding-Article.pdf). New and creative uses
of BBS data continue to appear regularly. The
BTO’s Breeding Bird Survey, which started in
1994, uses more intensive sampling at a smaller
circle. Observers walk line transects, first developed
in Finland, through 1-km squares. Both programs
involve the cooperation of coordinators, data man-
gers and statisticians.

When trends first became apparent in the BBS
data, Chan and his colleagues were alarmed by
decreases in populations of Neotropical migrants.
That concern led to the establishment of Partners
in Flight, a joint government and private conserva-
tion partnership and from 1984 to 2000 to a pro-
gram to study the effects of forest fragmentation
on migrants wintering in Mexico and Central and
South America.

Chan received many awards, including the
Arthur A. Allen Medal from the Cornell Labora-
tory of Ornithology in 1979, an Honorary Doctor-
ate of Sciences from the University of Maryland in
1995 and the Elliott Coues Award from the Amer-
ican Ornithologists’ Union in 1997. After he
retired in 2005 at the age of 87, he just switched
to volunteer service and continued his field stud-
ies. His winsome personality and legendary flat-top
haircut are gone, but fond memories and his many
published contributions remain.

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