

IN MEMORIAM

RICHARD W. STALLCUP, 1944–2012

On 15 December 2012, during the compilation of the Point Reyes Christmas Bird Count in Point Reyes Station, Rich Stallcup passed away in a San Rafael hospital from complications of leukemia. Rich was a co-founder of that count in 1970 and had participated in it every year until 2012. The birding community in California lost a soul of incalculable value as a teacher, naturalist, tour leader, and indefatigable cheerleader for the natural world. His reputation extended far beyond the borders of California; he was well known in birding circles across North America. An ordinary memorial cannot express the depth of his influence on people and how many lives he touched during his time on this planet. In January 2013, more than 500 people, some from as far away as the east coast, attended a memorial service for Rich.



Born Richard William Stallcup in Oakland, California, on 19 December 1944, Rich was educated in the Oakland public school system and attended California State University, Hayward. He had a single sibling, his older brother Kenneth. Married once, he had one daughter, Willow, and eventually two grandchildren. He spent his remaining years with his life partner, Heather Cameron.

His interest in birds began at the early age of six, when his father Leland took him on a field trip to Drake's Bay on the Point Reyes Peninsula. Throughout his life and international travels, Rich is remembered most for his love of Point Reyes and for living and spending most of his time in that region of California. Although he made over a thousand trips to Point Reyes he never lost his enthusiasm and fascination for the place. As he grew as a naturalist, his interest in things such as reptiles, amphibians, insects, and flora broadened his view of the natural world. He possessed a profound understanding of life on the Point Reyes Peninsula. Even the wandering to the outer point of a bird common only a few miles inland was of major interest to him. Beginning in the 1960s, Rich, along with confederates Guy McCaskie and C. J. Ralph, began to find rare vagrants regularly on outer Point Reyes, a phenomenon that has attracted birders to this area of California ever since. He wrote a field checklist (2000) of the *Birds of the Point Reyes Seashore* that totaled 470 species, of which well over half were vagrants, nearly all of which Rich had seen personally. Beginning in 1967 he also spent a great deal of time on the Farallon Islands, making frequent 2-week trips there between 1973 and 1978. In 1969, the Farallons became a national wildlife refuge.

Rich's views of life and nature took on a particular and perhaps inevitable orientation during the counterculture life of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although drafted and trained as a U.S. marine during the Vietnam War, Rich abhorred the thought of killing another human being, and he was able to get a discharge from further service. However, the experience had an indelible impact on his thinking. He realized that the web of life was entirely connected but that mankind had the single greatest influence on life, an influence seriously flawed by greed, ego, and a profound lack of understanding. Rich's understanding of this principle guided him throughout his life as he sought to

IN MEMORIAM

impart that connection to the many people he taught. As his classroom he preferred the field, where the immediacy of life was all around him. He fought many battles on behalf of wildlife that has no voice in the affairs of mankind.

In 1976 Rich joined the formation of the early tour group *Wings* and led dozens of trips in western North America and Mexico, but being away from Point Reyes and his family for extended periods took its toll, and he began to limit his tour leading mainly to California and Arizona. In 1975 and 1976 I was fortunate enough to co-lead with Rich two trips sponsored by PRBO Natural History Excursions, both of which will be long remembered. His love of Arizona rivaled his love of California.

Rich served as president of Western Field Ornithologists from 1975 to 1978 and was a founding member of the California Bird Records Committee, serving for 8 years. In 1967 he was the first resident bird bander at the fledgling Point Reyes Bird Observatory, set up in a converted chicken coop on outer Point Reyes. From those early days PRBO grew into an international conservation and research organization with a large staff and large annual budget. Rich maintained a close association with PRBO through most of his adult life and joined the staff as a resident naturalist in 1997. In 1982 the American Birding Association bestowed on him the Ludlow Griscom Award for outstanding contributions to American ornithology. In that same year he began a regular column in PRBO's newsletter (later called the *Observer*) that covered a vast range of topics relating to his personal observations and offering readers a unique personal perspective. He also served for 11 seasons as a co-editor of the quarterly report for the Middle Pacific Coast region in *American Birds*. The entire winter 2013 issue of the PRBO *Observer* (number 171) was dedicated to Rich and offers enriching glimpses of his life and legacy. It is a must read for everyone who knew him.

In 1966, when the *Guide to the Field Identification of Birds of North America* by C. S. Robbins, B. Bruun, and H. S. Zim was published by Golden Press, it was the first such field guide beside the Peterson series to appear since the early 1940s. As did a number of his contemporaries, Rich found that much of the book did not represent birds he knew in life and took to correcting the plates with a felt-tip pen. The guide was ultimately revised in 1983, but problems persisted. Rich then set about detailing the flaws in the Golden Nature Guide, and the result was a slim volume titled *Birds for Real*, which Rich published himself in 1985. Not only did this book reveal how much Rich knew about the species he covered, it also set the stage for field guides to follow and what would be demanded to cover the subject of bird identification adequately. The market for field guides became very competitive, and today most publishers are keenly aware of what a successful book must deliver. Today we have a plethora of excellent field guides that cover North America, Mexico, and South America that met this challenge. The entire ornithological community owes a debt to Rich for taking the time to raise the standard with something that went far beyond a typical book review.

Rich had a natural fascination with the sea and spent as much time as possible on boat trips off the shores of California. He was well known for his understanding of bird life at sea as well as of marine mammals. Yet for his first 25–30 boat trips he had a hard time with sea sickness. He eventually learned to control it without drugs, preferring to remain alert and vigilant, never knowing what might fly across the bow of the boat. Rich's enthusiasm was infectious, and he was often as excited at seeing a bird he had seen many times as he was the first time he encountered it. No one ever left one of his boat trips without feeling enlightened about something. His experience in the coastal waters of California resulted in *Ocean Birds of the Nearshore Pacific* (1990), in which he described the mechanics of seabirding and addressed the species' identification with descriptions and photographs, including some species not formally recorded in California at the time. *Ocean Birds of the Nearshore Pacific* is also an excellent primer on coastal oceanography and includes marine mammals, sea turtles, and some fish. It remains useful to this day. He was a senior or junior author or a contributor on dozens of reports, papers, checklists, and books during his life.

IN MEMORIAM

Rich's connection to the natural world was nearly mystical, and he imparted deep insights to his many followers. That was his true legacy, not a list of publications. He followed in the steps of many 19th century naturalists who were guided by their interest in natural history but who lacked a formal education in a given discipline, education that did not exist in the 19th century. When natural history became a "science," a great deal of what animates the natural world was lost at the expense of examining how the individual pieces worked and could be described. Rich never lost the importance of a wider connection, yet he understood and integrated the approach that "science" took. He had the soul of a poet, the mind of a scientist, and the spirit of a shaman—a combination of talents not often found in anyone, let alone a naturalist.

Rich's ability to find rare or uncommon birds was legendary. He often found birds where it seemed none were present, and for those who were fortunate to be in the field with him, this happened too often to be due merely to luck or chance. It was well beyond something that could be attributed to so mundane or trivial an explanation. There are too many such stories to be recounted here, but his ability was extraordinary. Some have said that he was the most gifted field ornithologist of his generation.

Rich was a dear friend for 46 years, a colleague, co-author, and fellow birder. He will be greatly missed by all who were fortunate enough to know him. He was one of a kind, with a staggering talent that few of us can ever hope to imagine.

Jon Winter