

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
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Birding in Peterson's Footsteps, Part 2
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This woodland at the top of Swede Hill in Jamestown may have been the site where, as a boy of 11, the great naturalist Roger Tory Peterson had an unforgettable and life-changing experience.

One thing that makes this region so special, including the Chautauqua Watershed itself, is that it informed the nascent skills of the great naturalist Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996), who went on to become one of the most influential figures of the 20th century.

In my last article I pointed out Peterson's boyhood home on Bowen Street in Jamestown, which served as his home base for forays into the woods and fields on the city's outskirts in search of the birds, insects, and wildflowers that fueled his passion for nature from the age of 11.

From there I promised to take you to Swede Hill, where young Roger had an especially formative and unforgettable experience 90 years ago.

From Peterson's Bowen Street home look southeast beyond the old factories in the Chadakoin River valley to the hill beyond. This is "Swede Hill," which was actually a mix of working-class neighborhoods of mostly Swedish and Italian emigrants.

At the bottom of Bowen Street, where it ends at East Second Street, turn left. Go 0.5 mile. At the intersection of East Second Street, Buffalo Street and Crescent Street turn right (not hard right) onto Buffalo Street. Go 0.2 mile, passing under the railway viaduct and, just before the traffic light turn hard right onto Allen Street. Go 0.9 mile to Willard Street.

At the stop sign turn left onto Willard Street and proceed up "Swede Hill." Go 0.5 mile. At Pardee Avenue turn right, and continue 0.2 mile uphill to the driveway for Bush Elementary School. You may park in the school parking lot. From here you will need to walk, along the access road that borders the raised water reservoir. With the reservoir on your left you will enter Reservoir Park.

No one knows for sure where Roger had his life-changing encounter with a Northern Flicker while on a bird-watching foray with his friend Carl Hammerstrom on April 8, 1920, but it may have been in the area where you are now. That morning the boys spotted

what looked like a brown bundle of feathers on the trunk of an oak (or possibly a maple). Curious, the boys approached. Roger touched it with his finger. What it was became clear in an instant. It was a Northern Flicker that had been sleeping, probably exhausted from migration. When Roger touched the bird it awoke, looked at him with wild eyes and took off with a flash of gold beneath its wings. Roger was transfixed. What had seemed dead was actually very much alive – almost like resurrection. From that moment on birds came to represent to Roger all the freedom, beauty and vitality of the natural world.

Spend some time birding along the wooded edge here. The mature trees are good woodpecker habitat. You may even see a flicker! And marvel that this landscape, in some ways changed and in others not so different from when an 11-year-old Jamestown boy went afield in search of adventure, is the same one we are called to honor and care for as we enter a new year. Let's do so with renewed vigor, following in Roger Tory Peterson's footsteps!

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local, private not-for-profit organization supported primarily by membership donations and grants from private foundations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. It is the only locally-based not-for-profit organization actively conserving important habitats, scenic sites and watershed lands in the county. It takes a preventive approach to address lake algae and plant problems. For a list of upcoming events go to <http://www.chautauquawatershed.org/> or call 716-664-2166.