

# RipariaNews



Newsletter of the Coyote Creek Riparian Station

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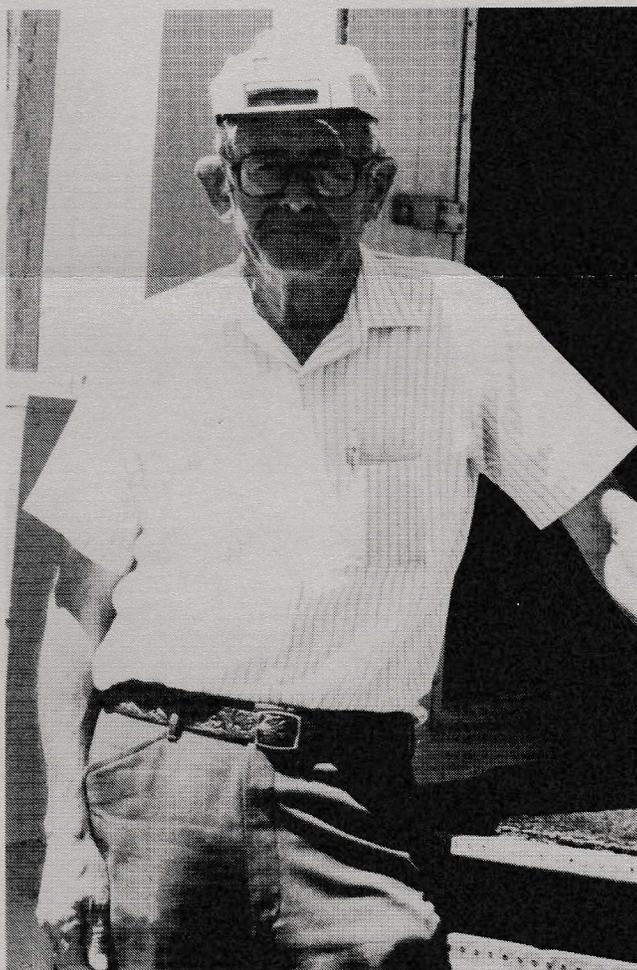
Special Edition

## *In Memoriam:* L. Richard Mewaldt

by Michael Rigney

The world of ornithology lost one of its great innovators when, on August 19, 1990, Dr. L. Richard "Dick" Mewaldt died of respiratory failure at Kaiser Hospital in Santa Clara. Dick had been afflicted, during the past year, with progressive loss of vital lung capacity. Ironically, the illness was apparently caused by an immunological response to his many years of close contact with birds.

Dick will be sorely missed not just because of his wealth of knowledge on birds, but perhaps more so because of his visionary leadership in establishing centers of ornithological study and his innate ability to infect others with his enthusiasm. He leaves behind a legacy of organizations and programs such as the Point Reyes Bird Observatory and its 25 year long landbird banding program; Coyote Creek Riparian Station and its comparatively young riparian bio-monitoring survey. Dick managed, through his long teaching career at San Jose State University, to launch a new generation of western ornithologists, many of whom



have gone on to establish international reputations.

Dick Mewaldt was born in 1917, into an academic environment in 1917. His father, Dr. Nathaniel H. "Scout" Mewaldt was a professor of mathematics at the Northern State College in Aberdeen, South Dakota. An avid outdoorsman and amateur paleontologist, Scout Mewaldt would take his young son on fossil digs in the Badlands of South Dakota, instilling in Dick a love and appreciation for nature.

At age nine or ten, Dick worked as a gardener for a man in Aberdeen who banded birds. Apparently, Dick spent more time watching and asking questions than he did gardening. Gardening's loss was ornithology's gain and soon Dick acquired his own banding permit. The rest, as they say, is history.

Dick graduated from high school and went on to get a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1939. After graduation he

moved to Washington D.C. where he worked briefly for the U.S. government. This was also where he met and married Frances Mewaldt.

Dick's academic career was interrupted by World

War II. After enlisting in the Army in 1942 he qualified to attend Officer Candidate School. He served a four year tour in the military police where he achieved the rank of Captain before his discharge in 1946.

He, Fran and their young son Bill then moved to Montana where Dick completed his Master's Degree in Zoology. His thesis entitled "The Nesting Habits and Some General Notes on Clark's Nutcracker" was completed in 1948 and provided important information on this little-studied mountain species. A more indepth examination of the molt and reproduction of the Clark's Nutcracker provided Dick with material for his Ph.D. thesis at Washington State University in Pullman which he completed in 1952. While at Washington State Dick formed a long and lasting relationship with his major professor, Dr. Donald S. Farner with whom he would collaborate on many research topics in the years to come. It was also Dr. Farner who introduced him to the species which would become his life-long passion - the White-crowned Sparrow.

Dick joined the staff of, what was then, San Jose State College in 1953 replacing Charles Sibley as the Biology Department's Ornithologist. Dick remained with San Jose State throughout the remainder of his teaching career. His continuing interest in research was unusual for faculty members in a school which was thought of primarily as a teacher's college. He quickly began attracting graduate students and soon developed funding for his research projects. At the same time Dick indulged his other life-long passion, bird banding, by establishing a regular banding program at his home in the foothills of east San Jose. Located adjacent to the lush fairways of the San Jose Municipal Golf Course, his backyard was landscaped by Fran and him to be especially attractive to (of course) White-crowned Sparrows.

A substantial grant from the National Science Foundation helped Dick and several graduate students launch the Avian Biology Laboratory at San Jose State. Experimental chambers and complicated electrical hardware began to be assembled on the roof of the Science Building at San Jose State as the Avian Biology Laboratory began delving into the secrets of bird migration.

A parade of graduate students and publications also began to emerge from the doors of the fledgling "ABL" as it soon came to be called. Dick and his graduate students not only studied migration in the laboratory but they also initiated investigations in the field to test the homing abilities and site faithfulness of his favorite species, the White-crowned Sparrow. He and graduate students Irene Brown, Lloyd Thompson, Martin Morton and C. John Ralph examined various aspects of internal and external stimuli prompting migration.

In several classic experiments, Dick and his students displaced White-crowned Sparrows of different ages to distant locations such as Baton Rouge Louisiana and Laurel Maryland. To everyone's amazement and delight, some of the birds returned to their original capture location after having migrated to their breeding grounds in the northwest. A culminating experiment which involved

displacing White-crowned Sparrows to Seoul Korea was controversial and provided negative results.

Dick was continually on the lookout for the ideal field location which would allow him to sample and monitor avian migration. He and his graduate students examined many locations along the coast and inland near his home in San Jose. As luck would have it, C.J. Ralph, one of Dick's graduate students at the time, was working as a seasonal aide for the National Park Service at the newly established Point Reyes National Seashore. C.J. had found an area on the coast near Bolinas which the Park Service had just acquired. C.J. and Dick approached the Superintendent of the Park about setting the Palomarin Ranch aside for use as a bird observatory. The Superintendent agreed, and with a grant from the Western Bird Banding Association, the Point Reyes Bird Observatory was established in 1965.

Dick, C.J. Ralph and several members of the Western Bird Banding Association acted as the chief operating officers for the Observatory as gradually a functioning Board of Directors and staff were assembled. Operating on a small amount of money for the first five years, a solid funding base was eventually established and a variety of research ventures were added to the basic bird banding program. Soon PRBO-sponsored programs on the Farallone Islands, shorebird studies on Bolinas Lagoon and Antarctic seabird studies were adding significant information to the body of ornithological literature. Today, after a very successful 25 years of scientific study the Point Reyes Bird Observatory is one of the finest and well-funded observatories in the world.

For most people, the founding of an important research organization would be accomplishment enough for one lifetime. Dick, however, was not one to rest on his laurels. Closer to home, he turned his attention to the little-studied birds of South San Francisco Bay. Working with graduate student Robert Gill, Dick began a long-term banding program focusing on colonial nesting birds in the south bay. Recoveries of these birds years later resulted in longevity data and a better understanding of migratory patterns in local heron, egret and tern populations.

Still searching for the quintessential location to study landbird migration, Dick discovered, in 1970, a site known as the Wool Ranch located atop a barren hill just north of his home in northeast San Jose. Within the ranch complex was a beautiful "hanging" valley just below the crest of a 3,000 foot mountain. A small stream, lined with willows and a decaying orchard, attracted large numbers of migrating songbirds. When environmental conditions during the spring and fall were right, Monument Peak and its sister, Mt. Allison, loomed above the early morning fog which enveloped the entire Bay Area. After migrating many miles at night, thousands of birds would descend on the willow patches and orchard to refuel for another migratory flight. Dick and his ornithology students banded 7 days a week at the ranch for a period of two years amassing volumes of data on timing of migration and species diversity. Unfor-

tunately, plans to create yet another bird observatory at the Wool Ranch fell on deaf ears. The Wool family finally, on the advice of their attorneys, evicted Dick and his students after just two full seasons of work.

Dick retired from active teaching in 1975 to devote full-time to his many research interests. Chief among these was a special place in south-central Oregon - a place called Hart Mountain. Dick had discovered this high desert paradise years before while capturing Mountain White-crowned Sparrows for his migration studies. This "isle of pines in a sea of sage" attracted Dick for many summers of banding and bird study during a ten-year period from 1972 to 1982. "In the company of good companions", he often spent weeks at a time working either at his "Blue Sky" headquarters or in remote canyons of the Warner Range. Dick was preparing the final draft of a monograph on the Birds of Hart Mountain at his death.

During these years after retirement Dick also found time to play important roles in several regional and national societies. He served as Secretary of the American Ornithologists Union during stormy days when debate raged furiously over whether to bring the remaining California Condors into a captive breeding program. Dick also served as President of the Cooper Ornithological Society and President of the Western Bird Banding Association.

In 1983 he was instrumental in helping to establish the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Housed in an historic building on the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, this newest of bird observatories carried on many of the waterbird and shorebird programs begun by Dick and Bob Gill in the mid-1970's. While in search of a good landbird banding station for SFBBO he happened upon a stretch of riparian habitat near the mouth of Coyote Creek. With a relatively dense band of mature riparian trees and shrubs lining its banks, bird life abounded. Beginning as a tail-gate operation in 1982, the program grew into a major field station of the new bird observatory. Later philosophical differences between Dick and the Board of Directors of SFBBO caused the separation of Dick's riparian banding program from the bird observatory in 1986. Incorporated that same year the Coyote Creek Riparian Station became the focus of Dick's efforts until his death several weeks ago.

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### IN CONCLUSION

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It would be difficult to point to one single accomplishment in Dick's life and say that it was his crowning achievement. Certainly the instrumental role which Dick played in the establishment of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory would be a significant milestone. His premier work on migration in landbirds has certainly secured a place for him in numerous ornithological texts. He has expanded our knowledge of the birds of the Great Basin habitat immensely with his work at Hart

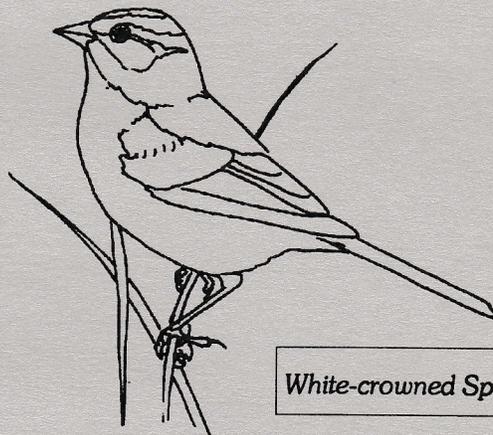
Mountain. For all of us at CCRS his steadfast conviction that this organization should grow and prosper gives us the courage to carry on his absence.

Dick did not just care about creating organizations; rather, he prided himself in being able to motivate people to stretch beyond their limits. At a party for Dick held just a week before his death, former graduate students told how, time and again, Dick would push them to achieve their full potential in academic and research fields. He never let up on himself or others. At times it could be extremely trying but all of who attended that party knew that if it were not for Dick's unrelenting drive and dedication most of us would not have realized our full capabilities. The world of ornithology owes a great deal to Leonard Richard Mewaldt, but those of us who were fortunate enough to be his students, colleagues and friends owe him so much more.

Dick is survived by his wife Fran and two sons, Dr. William Mewaldt of Fallon, Nevada and John Mewaldt of San Jose, California.

## MEMORIAL FUND ESTABLISHED

The Coyote Creek Riparian Station has established a memorial fund within our existing endowment fund to accept donations in Dick's memory. This fund will be used to provide the on-going resources to attain Dick's goal of long-term biomonitoring at Coyote Creek. Accrued interest and dividends generated by this fund will go to supply mist nets and additional banding equipment such as net poles, balances, banding pliers and other essential needs of a long-term project. At press time, similar funds were being established at Point Reyes Bird Observatory and with the Western Bird Banding Association. Your contributions will help insure that Dick's dream will be realized. Checks may be made out to the L. Richard Mewaldt Memorial Fund or to CCRS with a note that the donation is to be placed in the Memorial Fund.



White-crowned Sparrow

## COYOTE CREEK RIPARIAN STATION

Coyote Creek Riparian Station is a non-profit California membership corporation with United States and California tax exempt status. CCRS is dedicated to research on, and to the restoration and management of, riparian and wetland habitats including the wildlife and other animals that live there. CCRS is located on City of San Jose property near the town of Alviso. Coyote Creek Riparian Station operates in cooperation with the Santa Clara Valley Water District, San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant, U. S. Bird Banding Laboratory, Laurel, MD., San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and the California Department of Fish and Game. RipariaNews is published quarterly for the information of our CCRS membership, the personnel of the several cooperating federal, state, and local agencies, and for other organizations and individuals concerned with the flora and fauna of riparian and wetland habitats.

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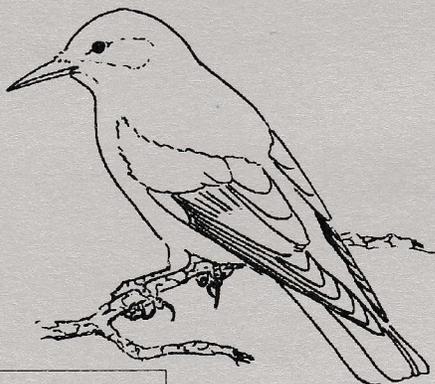
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A self portrait taken by Dick as he set out on a solo expedition. Note the ladder attached to his backpack which he used to check nests on cliffs or in tall trees. This picture was taken in 1982.



Clark's Nutcracker

