

Obituaries

Charles A. Wonderly

September 17, 1915 – January 12, 2002

President DVOC 1978 – 1979

Charles A. Wonderly, Honorary Member, Fellow, and past President of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (1978-79) passed away at age 87 on January 12, 2002 while visiting his wife Libby's family just outside Atlanta, Georgia. The memorial service was at a church in the Roxborough section of Philadelphia where Charlie lived.

Charlie's depth of knowledge about the natural world was phenomenal, and he loved sharing it. As a youngster, he roamed the woods and fished the Wissahickon Creek in Philadelphia. With his mother's encouragement he joined the Boy Scouts, and he made many lifelong friends through his long association with scouting. The list of Charlie's fellow Scouts reads like a "Who's Who" of early Philadelphia birders: Dale Twining, Alan Brady, Herb Cutler, Bob Sehl, Mark Robinson and the late Trusten Baldwin and Gene Stern.

Later, through the Scouts, Charlie joined the Comstock Society, the natural history arm of the Boy Scouts of America. In that connection, he met many interesting people, including Norman McDonald, who became President of DVOC. McDonald invited Charlie to go birding with him in the Wissahickon. Charlie said he was confident that he knew all the local birds. McDonald found 12 new species for him that day. Charlie learned about insect and reptile collecting from Mark Robinson, and soon began collecting reptiles for Roger Conant, who was then working on his book, *What Snake Is That?*

Charlie began going to Flamingo, at the southern tip of the Everglades, in the early 1940's, when there were only dirt roads leading into it. Back then, he said, before Everglades Park had even been thought of, he looked out at twilight across Florida Bay and the trees were "white with birds."



Those visits led to Charlie's lifelong involvement with the Everglades. On a 1960's visit to Flamingo he was dismayed to find that there were no more snake talks or bird or plant walks. The whole place had "gone environmental," he said. The visitors to the park seemed disappointed. So Charlie approached the head naturalist and told him that he believed that the people wanted to learn about the birds, and that he knew the birds well enough to lead a walk. The next day, 35 people turned up to go on Charlie's walk. 40 years later, along with park volunteers, Charlie was still leading nature walks at Flamingo, and continuing to instruct and enthrall people.

At the beginning of World War II, Charlie served in Washington, D.C. for two years. From there he went to Ft. Bliss, Texas, and learned the birds of Texas, and some of Mexico. His next post was electrician's school in Schenectady, New York, where he got a Skilled Electrician's Rating in seven weeks; this kept him out of the infantry. He spent seven weeks in Oahu, and three months in Saipan in the Marianas. He studied bird migration in Saipan, and wrote pages of lengthy descriptions of the birds. Fifteen years later, he threw all his writings away when *Birds of the Western Pacific* came out in print.

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He also collected reptiles, and pickled them in alcohol for Roger Conant. While stationed on Okinawa, he found a rare snake, a habu, which looks like a garter snake with fangs. Going on sick call without actually being sick, he visited the doctor in order to get rubbing alcohol to pickle the snake for shipping back to the U.S. He later received a commendation for finding and identifying the habu.

After his return from the war, he married Betty Strong whom he had known since high school. Amos Taylor, horticulturist and naturalist, and also a friend from high school, was best man.

Charlie worked for 28 years as a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service. Not one to waste any birding opportunities, he learned all the Roxborough birds by call while making his rounds. I tried to inspire my local mailman to take up birding by telling him about Charlie.

In 1947, Charlie joined the DVOC. Norman McDonald was president at the time, and Fred Ulmer was Conservation Chairman. Fred and Charlie spent a lot of time birding together. They found the first nest of a Red-bellied Woodpecker in the Wissahickon Valley.

One night, during a DVOC meeting, a watchman came in to tell Fred that he was wanted on the telephone. The Zoo was calling to tell Fred that three wolves had broken out of their cage. Charlie and Fred spent hours at the zoo that night catching them.

Charlie participated in many Christmas Bird Counts over the years, including the Comstock and Philadelphia Counts. Years ago, to do the Cape May Count, Charlie and other DVOC members, including Dale Twining and Norman McDonald, drove to Cape May the night before to stay at Ernie Choate's house at the Point so they could listen for owls. Charlie told me that the running joke every year was: "Which windowsill shall I sleep on?" Dale and Charlie regularly found 65 – 75 species at the Point.

Charlie taught classes at the Schuylkill Valley Nature Center (now Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education) for 10 years and introduced many people to birding. I was a member of that fortunate group.

Betty Wonderly passed away in 1983, and everybody who knew Charlie worried about him. He and Betty had done so many wonderful things together. But Charlie was lucky enough to marry Libby, Betty's stepsister, in 1985. And, until Charlie passed away, the two of them did wonderful things together.

I used to be a teacher. One of the greatest rewards a teacher can experience is hearing a former student say, "You made a difference in my life." Well, Charlie, lots of people said that about you. And I'm happy to say that I'm one of them. We all miss you.

Jane Henderson