

Martha (Marty) Chestem (1923-2016) – Waterford Flats Dedication, August 12, 2023

I'm honored to be speaking about Martha Chestem (or Marty as she was known to most people), who was a member of this club's founding committee and certainly one of the most significant individuals in the Howard County Bird Club's (HCBC) history.

Marty was a Nebraska native who never lost touch with her roots. For decades after leaving the state, she returned regularly, usually in March, both to visit relatives and to enjoy the thousands of Sandhill Cranes on their major stopover along the Platte River during spring migration--truly one of the continent's major natural spectacles.

Her college years were spent at Hofstra University, Long Island, New York where she majored in history, a lifelong interest. Her early post-college years included a stint as a stewardess at Braniff Airlines, but she eventually took a position at Social Security headquarters in Baltimore where she remained until her retirement.

Although Marty credits her mother with encouraging her interest in the natural world, it wasn't until the late 1960s when she was detailed to a regional Social Security office in Texas that her birding enthusiasm bloomed. As she told it, prior to one of her first weekends there, a woman in the office mentioned she planned to go on a bird trip and asked Marty if she'd be interested in joining her. Marty readily agreed—and that was the start of her intense birding journey.

Marty moved to Columbia around 1970 when it was still in its infancy--Wilde Lake was the only village at the time. She zipped around in a Karmann Ghia convertible. Despite her fondness for that car, she realized it was not the ideal vehicle for a birder. When the time came to trade it in, she reluctantly went with a Honda Accord, boring, but definitely more suited to carrying assorted birding gear.

Her growing passion for new birds dovetailed nicely with her job in various regional headquarters. She made it a point to plan at least one weekend before or after each assignment in order to bird the surrounding area. Most of her vacation time was planned with birding in mind. By chance, her increasing interest coincided with a dramatic improvement in optics, along with an explosion in the number and variety of field guides, books, and magazines devoted to bird identification.

Travel groups geared to birders were just beginning to appear. For Marty, they offered excellent opportunities, as they supplemented what she did on her own. A new national birding organization, the American Birding Association, was founded in 1968 devoted to the sport of birding, and Marty quickly joined. She attended their first national convention in Kenmare, ND in the summer of 1973. With the town's population of just under 1,000, an influx of more than a hundred people for even a few days was a challenge that the residents met with Midwestern hospitality and organizational skill. Major meals were arranged in a local church hall, cooked and served by ladies from the church. From the heat of a Midwestern summer and the special grassland and prairie pothole birds of the Upper Midwest, Marty was just as quick to sign up for one of the first trips to Adak, Alaska, an island in the Aleutian chain. To describe the lodgings (in buildings from the old naval base) as spartan would be an understatement. Marty's most vivid memories of that trip were, not only the excellent birds, but also, the huge cans of baked beans and spaghetti. She rarely complained about living conditions on any trip looking on all such experiences as a small price to pay for new birds. Within a decade, her U.S. life list was above 500 and she had been to all 50 states and most of the Canadian provinces. Among the items Marty left in her townhouse after her final move west was an appointment calendar for the year 1982, possibly the first year of her retirement. It provided a peek into the kind of birding travel she enjoyed. For each outing, she recorded the location, weather, and a list of the birds—in Latin. She was not a student of Latin so it appears she was just trying to learn the names as an intellectual exercise. She gave it up halfway through the year. She began that birding year with a January 2nd pelagic Christmas Count out of Ocean City. For the next four months, she birded in Maryland at various locations. In early May she chaired the MOS convention on the Eastern Shore, then, in late May, she began more serious travel beginning with time at Point Pelee for warblers followed by a quick trip to Grayling, Michigan for Kirtland's Warbler. June brought a combined trip to northern Minnesota and North Dakota with a connection north to Manitoba and Churchill, followed by a week at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. There was a summer week at Hog Island, Maine, time at Cape May, New Jersey during fall hawk migration, and visits to Blackwater, Bombay Hook, and Chincoteague at varying times. The last months of the year took her to NC in November for the North American Bluebird Society convention and to Texas from Corpus Christi to Brownsville in December. Quite a year!

But sometime in the mid to late 1980s, Marty pivoted decisively from bird listing to bird watching in the broadest sense of the term. At a time when notching 600 speies in the U.S. was the holy grail of listing and she either was close to that total or over it, she stopped divulging any numbers for her lists considering it personal information. Although she continued to participate in seasonal counts, to travel frequently, and to bird with many Howard County friends, her focus now was on bird behavior. Most of her time was spent walking slowly, standing, or sitting, watching and listening for whatever might appear. The emphasis was on observing and learning. She participated in the HCBC's wildflower survey project (even taking a botany course at Howard Community College to provide a better background). She was also part of the active group who used the club's mounted bird specimens to make numerous presentations to school classes and community groups.

Although quiet by nature, she held a variety of leadership positions, both elected and appointed, including vice-president and president of both the HCBC and the state MOS, but these roles are not what come to mind first when I think of her.

The three characteristics that set Marty apart in my memory were 1) her creativity, 2) her willingness to take on jobs that no one else wanted, and 3) the importance she placed on thanking as many people as possible for their contributions to the HCBC.

She collected bird cartoons gleaned from newspapers and magazines. Her favorite cartoonist was Gary Larson—one of his signed cartoon boards was a cherished possession. One day, during the 1990s, she pulled out her collection and began arranging half a dozen one-panel cartoons on a 12 x 16" white board. She created eight or ten designs with different cartoons for each, then took them to a local store to be reproduced on heavy stock. She ordered at least 50 copies and donated them to the person chairing the HCBC potluck as placemats. For more than a decade, her bird cartoon placemats were a much-anticipated and unique aspect of the club's annual event.

The place mats were an example of her creative side; her willingness to take on unpleasant tasks was best illustrated by her mastery of the intricacies of bulk mailing for the U.S. Postal Service. For a while in the 1990s, the Howard Chapter mailed *Maryland Birdlife* under MOS's bulk mailing permit at the Columbia post office; in return, we were allowed to use the permit for our newsletters. As the saying goes, "You don't get something for nothing." For the attractive postage price break, it was necessary to comply with a lengthy list of regulations which changed with frustrating frequency. Marty became the resident expert on these arcane rules. Lest you think it would be easy to pass off mistakes, let me assure you, it only took one trip in which a postal employee sampled a number of bundles for accuracy—and rejected the whole mailing—before you realized that MOS and the HCBC owed Marty their undying gratitude for taking on this thankless job.

The third attribute that sets Marty apart in my memory was her desire to show appreciation to as many people as possible who contributed to the success of this club. As one of the most active members of the HCBC, she was aware that there was a core group that took on major responsibilities and became the public face of the club. She also recognized that, no matter how effective that essential group was, one could not have a dynamic and growing organization without the time, talents, and investment of dozens and dozens of members. She took it on herself for decades to quietly thank as many individuals as possible. From time to time, she frequented antiques stores, buying a handful of any old unused picture postcards they might have. With a short note, they served as thank you cards. For decades, she distributed them liberally.

Marty would have been thrilled to have a portion of her generous bequest used to help establish Waterford Flats, for shorebirds and corvids were among her favorite groups of birds. One summer she spent a week in Maine at a shorebird workshop, and each spring and fall she visited the Eastern Shore to enjoy shorebird migration.

For those who, in any way, helped to make Waterford Flats a reality, you can be assured that, if Marty were with us, each of you would have received a postcard from her—probably in green ink, a favorite color. The message would have been brief, perhaps something like "Waterford Flats is wonderful! The shorebirds will thank you! Marty."

And in that same spirit, we, gathered here today, thank YOU for your generosity, Martha Chestem!

--Joanne Solem