

Dr. Chandler S. Robbins, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

Dr. Chandler S. Robbins moved to Laurel in the early 1940s and became a major influence not only on the conservation of the Patuxent River valley but on the conservation of birds around the country. He was instrumental in galvanizing amateur bird watchers to collect data for studies of migrating and breeding birds around North America. Chan, as everyone called him, mentored many young budding naturalists to get into the fields of natural history and conservation. Chan worked for six decades at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center south of Laurel. He authored or co-authored hundreds of scientific papers, reports, and books and conducted research projects around the world. His 1966 *Golden Guide to North American Birds* became an instant bestseller. One of the many albatrosses he banded on Midway Island in the 1950s became known as the oldest living wild bird in the world. “Wisdom” was still producing eggs when she was over 70 years old!

Chan married Eleanor Cooley in 1948; they had met on a bird walk. Chan and Eleanor, who died in 2008, were active in many projects of the Maryland Ornithological Society from its inception in 1945. They were also philanthropists, giving generously to ornithological groups and conservation organizations, always concerned with preserving land and habitat for birds. Chan and Eleanor raised four children a short distance from this mural over on Brooklyn Bridge Road, where they also banded thousands of birds over the decades.

Chan was a man of boundless energy, unflagging positivity, deep kindness, and exceptional intellectual capabilities. He spent his lengthy career entirely as a field ornithologist at the Patuxent Research Refuge. There he combined the emerging need for information on avian distribution, migration and population change with using bird data collected by volunteers. Chan brought an appreciation for the needs, as well as capabilities of volunteer birdwatchers that transformed our way of gathering bird data. He trained small armies of volunteers to conduct his projects. He connected with individual birders and collectively through bird clubs and organized bird counts with a focus on the development of the birders’ song identification skills. Combined with a superhuman tolerance for the bookkeeping aspects of bird counting and a love of being in the field, Chan’s bully pulpit in public service enabled him to launch monitoring programs and research initiatives that have formed the basis of North American bird conservation. The pinnacle of all this work was Chan’s Breeding Bird Survey started in the mid-1960s. This program has established population trends for most North American birds.

Although officially retiring in 2005, Chan worked until the end of his life. He would come into his office several days each week to work on a variety of projects. Chan gave his final presentation to a local bird club in November 2016 and a couple of days later went birding near his home. The following day he went into the hospital. All who knew him sorely do miss him, and generations to come will benefit from his work. His was a life well birded.

— Jay Sheppard