

ROGER EDDY: MR. AUDUBON BIRDCALL



COURTESY ROGER EDDY

In his writing, Roger Eddy comes across as a man of self-deprecating humor, one who doesn't take himself too seriously. Even so, I had some misgivings about introducing myself to the inventor of the famous Audubon Birdcall, which I had described in one of my books as the gadget birders leave at home in a drawer—a comment that might be considered a put-down. If by chance Roger Eddy had read and remembered that remark, would he hold it as a black mark against me?

I need not have worried. Eddy was not the least upset by it. He knows that experienced birders have developed their own means of attracting bird attention without the

use of a mechanical device. To admit this detracts nothing from the unquestioned value of the Audubon Birdcall, of which he is frankly and extremely proud.

"What it has accomplished," he believes, "is to interest tens of thousands of people in birds and other aspects of nature. It has become, so to speak, an entry for people, particularly young people, into the world of birds. It has made the hobby fun for those who might otherwise be in awe of those with their binoculars and their notebooks and their lifetime bird lists."

It becomes obvious immediately that he is not one of those who keep lists and travel widely to add new species. He doesn't pretend to be a



BIRD ILLUSTRATION BY LOHRI CROOK

birder. He thinks of himself primarily as a farmer, and he views his 90-acre farm in Connecticut, only 3½ miles from the center of Hartford, as a sort of oasis in the midst of urban sprawl, a "small island of refuge for birds and animals in an increasingly hostile environment." Growing up on this same farm, he enjoyed rambling through its woods and fields with its abundant wildlife. Now, he cheerfully admits, he has become fanatical (his own word) about preserving this land for birds and small mammals.

He knows them all, and in any given season he can tell you what wildlife can be found on his private sanctuary. "I probably watch birds far more than most bird watchers," he says, "and woe to him, or her, who disturbs this little island I've spent my life preserving." No one is allowed to prowl around on the Eddy farm except for the members of the Hartford Audubon Society, who have permission to do their annual bird survey there.

Eddy does not accompany them. This would involve more walking than he could manage comfortably. His mobility was impaired by a serious bout with polio some 45 years ago, when he was a young man readjusting to civilian life after serving four years in the infantry in World War II.

"I didn't walk at all for a couple of years," he says, matter-of-factly. He is a man who adjusts to realities without fuss or complaint. Now at 73 he finds walking more difficult, but he gets around the farm quite capably. "I have seven tractors," he explains. "I call them my legs."

He has never encountered a bird on his farm that could qualify as a rarity, but a great variety of interesting migrants stop over. Among them, he occasionally spots a newcomer that he doesn't recognize. A keen observer, he makes careful note of its field marks and looks it up in his well-worn Peterson field guide.

Understandably, he doesn't keep lists. How would he ever find the

time? He has his hands full producing and marketing the Audubon Birdcall, and running the farm. It used to be a dairy farm, but adjusting to changing times and demands, he switched to growing fresh vegetables, which he markets at his two roadside stands during the season. This alone is a full-time occupation, employing 15 people, and it enables him to keep the cherished farm intact.

Fortunately, he's out of politics now. Politics? Oh, yes. He served several terms in the Connecticut legislature, first as representative and then as senator. But he ended his political career in 1986 when he ran for the U.S. Senate and was defeated by Christopher Dodd. Now, he declares, he won't run again "for anything." Again, that philosophical acceptance of reality.

He likes to joke that his success with the Audubon Birdcall made it possible for him to be a failure at other endeavors—like politics, and writing. Still, having four published novels to his credit wouldn't be considered failure by most writers. The point is, his books—now out of print—didn't bring in enough income to support his family.

Eddy, a Yale graduate with a gift for turning a neat phrase, looked forward to a career in writing after his military service, and for a time was a frequent contributor to *The Saturday Evening Post*, among other magazines. His first novel, *The Rimless Wheel*, published in 1948, was a modest success. Ten years passed before the appearance of a second novel, *The Bulls and the Bees*, with a farm setting, as the title suggests. It was followed in 1959 by his most successful book, *A Family Affair*. By that time, he had launched the Audubon Birdcall, which truly became a family affair and left him less and less time for writing. His last novel, *Best by Far*, appeared in 1966. After that, he published one more book, a non-fiction work provocatively titled: *Never Trust a President of the United*

States: So Said Jefferson, So Said Lincoln.

Does he do any writing now? "Oh, of course. I'm always writing," he says. "You know how it is with writers."

Any special projects? "Yes, but I don't want to talk about them." Any writer knows that the best way to kill a project is to talk about it in advance.

So back to the Audubon Birdcall. How did he get the idea? His stock reply is, "Well, it was either that or get a legitimate job." But seriously, was it a lucky accident, as so many inventions are? Where did the inspiration come from? Then he gets serious.

"After World War II," he says, "I got married, had two kids, and we went back to look at Europe. We lived in Italy for a while, and I tried to make a living writing for magazines. There weren't any birders there—birds were for shooting and eating—even song-birds. But I went out with a hunter one day, and he had a bird-attracting device—not like mine, but it worked. It intrigued me, and I planned to write an article about it. Then when I got home, I said to myself, 'Gee, why don't I make one myself?'"

As he has said, he comes from a long line of inventors ("Well, tinkerers is more like it," he amends.

"None of them invented anything memorable.") So once he put his mind to it, he was able to work out a design of his own that was both simple and effective, a handy little gadget made of birchwood and pewter that, when twisted, produced an amazing variety of chirps and tweets. He wrote an article about it for *The Saturday Evening Post*, and it was written up in *The New Yorker*. After that publicity, the gadget caught on beyond all expectations. Production and marketing soon involved the entire family, and daughters Heidi and Lucy pitched in to help fill orders.

Eddy's standards are high. No birdcall is sold without being tested in advance. Every one is made by hand.

"That's the only way to do it," he says. He has adamantly rejected all proposals to have it mass produced, in this country or abroad. He refuses to relinquish quality control. It's a matter of integrity.

As he plans a trip to California with one of his daughters to visit some of the more than 200 outlets that handle the birdcall, he laughs about one of his early attempts to establish a market. Rejections were common, and one merchant was especially blunt in turning him down. Thinking he might suggest more appropriate places to sell it, Eddy asked him, "Could you give me any advice?"

"Yes," the merchant replied, "go get yourself a decent job."

Fortunately, Roger Eddy is not easily discouraged. Now, 40 years later, he can report that millions of his birdcalls have been sold, and sales keep increasing every year. Orders come in from gift shops, sporting goods stores, bookstores, shops featuring wild bird supplies, and from mail order companies. The thumb-size gadget, which has been called one of the more remarkable of the minor inventions to appear on the market in the last 50 years, is sold all over the world, from South Africa to Japan, from Australia to Canada.

The success of the Audubon Birdcall, Eddy believes, is "a testament to the exploding interest in birds and the environment." (It is also quite probable that his invention has contributed to that explosion.) "This," he observes of the trend toward nature and environmentalism, "has become, in my lifetime, one of the fastest growing 'businesses' in the United States—and it is also growing rapidly overseas." He welcomes the trend, not just as a businessman, but as a dedicated conservationist.

He writes his own promotion material and carries on a lively correspondence, doing most of the typing himself. In his voluminous files he has enthusiastic letters from teachers

who have used the birdcall on nature walks; from wildlife photographers; from scout leaders who carry them on hikes; from diplomats who have taken them abroad as gifts to foreign dignitaries. Most rewarding of these are the hundreds of letters from teachers from every state in the nation.

But there are occasional letters from veteran birders who have used the birdcall to good advantage. He produces a letter from Sally Loving of Bath, Maine, to prove a point:

"For years I have carried one of your birdcalls in my car. I use it to entertain the kids and occasionally to call up a bird if fishing doesn't do the trick. I have had experienced birders tell me, 'It's cute but it really is just a toy.'

"In late March a few years ago, I was birding at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge (in Delaware) with a friend. We were casually strolling one of the roads along the fields, and I was tweeting your birdcall, hoping to interest some early migrants. Suddenly, two bald eagles took to the air from behind the trees and made a beeline for our position. We watched in awe as they flew directly to us and circled 20 feet about our heads for several minutes. They lost interest as soon as I stopped tweeting. We let them disappear over the treeline, and then I started to tweet again. Back came the eagles, circling and squealing their high-pitched call. They were obviously responding to the birdcall. We surmised that they were nesting nearby and were either alarmed, excited, or confused by the pitch of the birdcall. Some toy!!!"

So much for my pronouncement that this is a gadget experienced birders leave at home in a drawer.

Just as writers never stop writing, inventors never stop inventing. Roger Eddy's latest invention is another simple gadget that can quickly and inexpensively transform a two- or three-liter plastic soda bottle into a birdfeeder, thus encouraging recycling,

a cause he's eager to promote. This new product has already spread all over the United States. He doesn't anticipate that it will ever achieve the phenomenal success of the Audubon Birdcall, but it is a good, steady seller.

Does he have any other inventions up his sleeve? "No, not at the moment," he says, "but you never know when an idea will strike. I spend a lot of time in hardware stores. That's where you get ideas."

Meanwhile, Eddy watches with some satisfaction the sales reports on a small, pocket-size book put out by Klutz Press in 1992 and titled *Everybody's Everywhere Backyard Bird Book*. "It's a children's book," he says—but its tongue-in-cheek tone, tipped off by the subtitle, "A Coast-to-Coast Guide to the Birds You're Already Supposed to Know," is appealing to adults, too.

The extra appeal of the book, however, is a small gadget attached to its spiral binding with a leather thong: the indestructible Audubon Birdcall. The combination was an instant hit, creating such a demand for handcrafted birdcalls that both of Eddy's daughters, now married and raising children of their own, were needed to help with production. At last report, sales had topped 300,000.

That's probably as close as Roger Eddy will ever come to producing a best-seller. And that's good enough for him. □

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