



Outdoors: Bird watchers lose friend in Fran McMenemy

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Last Saturday, the music stopped in the local bird world. **Fran McMenemy**, the much beloved Godfather of Worcester County birders, passed away Saturday at age 83.

Humble, patient and quietly unpretentious, our senior authority on local birds and mentor to hundreds of birders taught bird identification and the joys of bird song as a field trip leader for Worcester County's Forbush Bird Club. For more than 50 years, Worcester County proved a birding treasure for Fran and all those willing to follow him.

Like a magician with a magic wand, he'd point his Sennheiser microphone at an elusive, impossible-to-see male bird singing on territory, record and play back its song, attracting it close and bringing to life the magic and beauty of the bird world to countless, amazed watchers. He thus developed many new birders and conservationists, bringing much sympathy and support to the preservation of open space and the birds that depend on it.

He lamented the precipitous loss of wild land and farms here — and the diminishment of the once abundant warblers that “dripped from the trees” in spring migrations long ago.

A tinkerer and innovator, Fran kept up with the latest technology to record bird songs. His deafening work at a General Motors assembly plant cruelly affected his hearing in later years, limiting his enjoyment of the high-pitched Cape May, bay-breasted and blackpoll warbler chorus. Uncomplaining, he persisted with hearing aids. His library of Worcester County bird songs is a local treasure.

Fran had no desire to travel abroad. Boynton Park, Mount Wachusett, Worcester Airport, Oxbow, Quabbin, Quaboag, the Blackstone — his world was Worcester County, which provided a lifetime of avian challenges and rewards.

McMenemy would revel in recording all species as they freshly migrated here from the tropics — or in documenting a new species for the county and sharing his rare finds with other Forbush members. I often wondered what he enjoyed more — seeing the new birds — or the excitement on our appreciative faces. Whether looking at an eagle, egret, vireo or vulture, he took great pleasure in setting up his spotting scope for everyone to have an amazing view.

His efforts as compiler of the Worcester Christmas Bird Count and his contribution to the Chickadee, the yearly archive of Worcester County bird sightings, are of great historical importance, earning his election to the presidency of Forbush and the receipt of their rarely bestowed and most prestigious Forbush Fellow Award.

What separated Fran from many other authorities was his disarming ability to relate — without any hint of pompous arrogance — to the full spectrum of admiring birding personalities. Everyone loved him, the effete, the low brow, the eccentric or the regular, be they talented veterans, professionals or tabula rasa rookies. Everyone appreciated his self-effacing generosity to share his incomparable local knowledge.

It was my great privilege, just hours before he lapsed into a coma in the St. Vincent ICU, to play him a chorus of our county's spring bird songs that I had recorded. Owls and orioles, wrens and warblers — such was the music that always stirred his soul. Supported by a breathing tube, Fran couldn't speak, but subtly smiled upon hearing them. When asked if he wanted me to stop after playing his favorite, most-musical thrush songs, he subtly shook his head, making it clear he wanted more. Even in a hospital bed, he wasn't going to miss the spring migration.

Fran was my mentor 40 years ago, giving me — and so many others — a priceless gift that has led us on a magical, lifetime path to study birds. His generous spirit joins the pantheon of deceased, local ornithological titans, **Elmer Ekblaw, Raymond Gregory, Harry Parker, David Wetherbee, Lloyd Jenkins, Davis Crompton** and **Nancy Ober**, who inspired a love for birds in all who followed them.