



2018 INDUCTEE

P.D. SKAAR

1923-1983

Palmer David Skaar, one of the most important contributors to our understanding of Montana birds, arrived in Bozeman from Mishawaka, Indiana, in 1957 to teach microbial genetics at Montana State College.

Although he taught and published in the field of microbial genetics—probing the genes of microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses—Dr. Skaar’s original contribution to Montana’s outdoor heritage is bird study, especially bird distribution across this vast state. His work is significant because it requires monitoring of all birds, in all seasons, year after year.

Skaar, not surprisingly, was an orderly record keeper. What is surprising is that he inspired birder watchers to take up his specific methods.

Skaar’s system requires birders to document where birds live by recording them in areas called “latilongs,” rectangular tracts of land formed by the intersection of latitude and longitude mapping lines. Montana, for instance, has 49 latilongs.

To do this, Skaar persuaded birders that it was vital to classify birds observed between spring and fall as showing “direct,” “indirect,” or “no evidence” of breeding.

Further, birds seen in winter must be classified as either “overwintering,” with regular winter-time observations; or “observed during winter season,” but not confirmed overwintering.

With this recording scheme, Skaar published *Birds of the Bozeman Latilong* in 1969, followed by two editions of *Montana Bird Distribution* in 1975 and 1980.

Skaar mobilized professional and amateur

birdwatchers to achieve the seemingly impossible year-round monitoring task.

There is no question that birders are a meticulous lot, so it might have been fortuitous for so many to participate in Skaar’s systematic experiment. Yet, there was always a kind of welcoming ease to the professor’s demeanor.

“Dave’s enthusiasm was contagious,” a colleague explained. “And his patience and modesty were exemplary. He was not one to discourage or belittle the amateur; his words were always encouraging and never demeaning.”

Skaar’s birders have tallied more than 1.1 million individual records since 1975. His system is still used today, maintained as a public resource in the Montana Natural Heritage Program’s database.

The impacts of Skaar’s *Montana Bird Distribution* books have been extraordinary. Today, the information is used by government agencies, NGOs, and private consultants. It provides a clearer understanding of the effects of mining, timber sales, subdivisions, utility and pipeline corridors, oil and gas developments, highway construction projects, land purchases, and conservation easements.

Seven editions of *Montana Bird Distribution* have been published. There will undoubtedly be more because the information submitted is cumulative, adding new bird records to those documented historically.

P.D. Skaar’s work empowered amateur, citizen birders by establishing rigorous standards for accepting records that have made Montana a better place—for birds and each of us. ■

