Finding Eden

Written by James Hutchisson

JOHN HENRY DICK—a renowned bird painter; hunter-turned-conservationist; global explorer; author; photographer; and “a humble man full of culture, quiet curiosity, and deep perceptions,” according to his friend, photographer Tom Blagden—made his home at Dixie Plantation. There, on the nearly 900 acres of meadows, wetlands, and pine forest along the Stono River, the self-described “artist naturalist,” who died in 1995, created his own Eden, where he could write, draw, paint, and share his observations. Learn about the man and the legacy he left to the Lowcountry and the world.
"A year later, it's certainly nice to feel that there may be more movement toward making Charleston a safer place to bicycle. Maybe more people are aware of the issues because of Edwin...."

—Whitney Powers

Ride On: Olive Gardner and Whitney Powers continue to cycle around town, as their father/husband Edwin loved to do. "I hope we get a lot of people together to make our city a safe place to ride bikes," says Whitney.

on the Ashley River Bridge, Charleston Moves has its sights on an ambitious project, Battery2Beach, which involves mapping out and creating signs for a 24-mile bicycling route from Isle Palms to Folly Beach. The path would wind through Sullivan’s Island, Mount Pleasant, downtown Charleston, and James Island. Students from the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department at The Citadel have spent the past year doing an analysis of the costs and feasibility of the project.

Tom O’Rourke, executive director of the Charleston County Parks and Recreation Commission (CCPRC), says Battery2Beach is a good start, but doesn’t go far enough. He notes that the CCPRC is beginning a master-planning project that will address how to create a network of trails for walking and bicycling that would, ideally, connect the county’s parks to one another from McClellanville to Edisto.

Other ideas big and small are in the works for greater Charleston. And while many of these projects may appear far-flung or lofty today, the cadre of smart and engaged supporters of bicycling in the area remain hard at work. Both public and official sentiments seem to be warming toward two-wheeled transportation. If solutions and connections continue to be found, riding a bike around town is likely to become safer and more realistic for many residents and visitors. So, while the road might be bumpy for a while, hold onto those handlebars, Charleston—we may be in for a beautiful ride.

PEDAL POWER
Keep in touch with two-wheeled issues:

- **Charleston Moves**: an advocacy group for bicycle and pedestrian issues; current efforts include the Battery2Beach route and the Ashley Crossing Coalition.
  charlestonmoves.org
- **Holy City Bike Co-op**: advocates for the use of bicycles instead of gasoline-powered vehicles whenever possible; it also offers workshops for bicycle repair and safety.
  bolycitybikecoop.org
- **Palmetto Cycling Coalition**: organization working statewide to improve safety and access for bicyclists.
  pccsc.net
- **Safe Streets**: Palmetto Cycling Coalition's multimedia bicycle safety campaign that includes four popular video PSAs safestreetssavelives.org
Bachman's Warbler

Seen April 15, '58

Bachman's Warbler, from Volume 1 of John Henry Dix's Quest Books.

The avid birders is considered to be the first person to photograph the rarely seen songbird, which is endangered and quite possibly extinct.
n early February 1962, after five days of pleasant elephant rides in the hill country of Uttar Pradesh, India, John Henry Dick experienced a moment of great excitement and utter fear. He had come to the subcontinent for the first time, finally achieving a life’s dream of seeing its birds and other animals in the wild. In those days, this was only possible by joining a hunting safari or “tiger camp.” The killing of tigers was still legal, and back then there was no such thing as a nature tour of a country. Moreover, hunting had been part of Dick’s life since childhood.

That morning, scouts brought news that two buffalo had been killed a few miles away, meaning that tigers were near. Dick and his party scrambled into their Jeeps and took off into the bush. Not five minutes later, he glimpsed his first wild tiger, a magnificent creature walking sinuously across the field like honey poured onto a canvas of green. Dick was profoundly struck by the feeling that he and the tiger, like all animals, belonged to the same earth. They were both just sojourners—temporary occupants of a splendidly mysterious realm. Because they shared the same world, they were bound to each other in some mystical, inscrutable, but discoverable way.

To see the animal, Dick would later write, “was a moment of supreme excitement, but now that it was here I dreaded it. I knew I did not want to kill the tiger. I had allowed myself to become completely involved in the hunt, perhaps believing the confrontation would never really take place. Photographing the animal would have been more to my liking, but now it was too late. I was committed…A sense of confused shame engulfed me. Why did I, supposedly a sensitive person, have to ‘prove’ myself in this manner?…The fading, slightly torn tiger skin rug in my living room is a constant reminder of how long it sometimes takes to grow up.”

As he later recalled in his book Other Edens, Dick was transformed that day on the far side of the world from hunter to conservationist, trading his rifle for a camera. He was to become one of the foremost wildlife illustrators and painters of birds in his time, and he was to make his home a beautiful 862-acre estate on the Stono River in Meggett: Dixie Plantation.
The Natural

The world of untrammeled nature was one Dick had known intimately since his boyhood prowling the vast acreage of Southside Sportsmen's Club in Islip, Long Island. In its pine and oak woods, Dick felt an unprecedented freedom. The woodlands and marshes were also happy refuges from the tall house on 84th Street in Manhattan, where he had a privileged but somewhat cloistered upbringing. The first marriage of his mother, Madeleine Force Dick, had been to businessman John Jacob Astor IV, a member of one of the country's wealthiest families. The couple had been returning from their honeymoon in Europe aboard the Titanic in 1912 when Madeleine—19 years old and five months pregnant with Dick's half-brother, John Jacob Astor VI—escaped in a lifeboat. Her husband perished. Madeleine remarried her childhood friend, William Karl Dick, and John Henry was born seven years later. His mother instilled in him a keen sense of the good fortune that he had inherited, both literally and metaphorically. "I'm a most lucky man," Dick often said.

Growing up in Manhattan, he was a frequent visitor to the American Museum of Natural History. He identified with the most famous friend of that iconic institution, Theodore Roosevelt, in the Rough Rider's unquenchable thirst for travel and adventure. Later in life, Dick would also admire Roosevelt's dedication to conserving the planet's natural resources. He would come to believe that nature, in its sublimity and wildness, inspired important values among a nation's citizens and could help to make a good country a great one.

Dick spent two years at Yale Art School and then four more years "of compulsory tedium" in the Army Air
Force during World War II, where as a young first lieutenant he was granted a precious glimpse at the birds of the South Pacific islands. The day the war ended, he was on Iwo Jima, and with the fighting over, he freely explored the island’s “devastated landscape.”

In the mid-1930s, Dick’s mother had purchased Dixie Plantation—sight unseen—as a winter home. A few months later, she travelled down by train to inspect it and was met at the station in Yemassee by the caretaker, who told her there had been a fire and the house had burned to the ground. Madeleine turned around and rejoined the train to New York. Five months later, she was dead of a heart ailment. Dick inherited the property in 1939 and built a new house there eight years later, “looking out on miles of tidal salt marsh.” He settled in, began painting, and made it his home base for the rest of his life.

His paintings and peregrinations resulted in many illustrated books, including _South Carolina Bird Life_ (1949), _The Warblers of America_ (1957), _Carolina Low Country Impressions_ (1964), _A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent_ (1983), and _The Birds of China_ (1984). These tomes are still regarded as definitive treatments of their subjects. _Other Edens_, which he subtitled “The Sketchbook of an Artist Naturalist,” was published in 1979 and is an apt testament to his wanderlust. In the book, Dick recounted his journeys to such disparate quarters of the globe as Greenland, Costa Rica, the Falklands, Antarctica, Alaska, and New Guinea.

**Call of the Wild**

What the poet William Butler Yeats called “the lonely impulse of delight” propelled Dick on nearly four decades of travel, producing not only some of
East African Crowned Cranes (from Volume 5) in it he notes: “East African crowned cranes native from Southwick Wild Animal Farm Jan. 15 ‘67... What a pleasure it is to hear that wonderful trumpet call of theirs.” The Charleston Natural History Society honored Dick with its 1985 Conservation Award for his efforts in the captive breeding of endangered species as well as wildlife conservation and natural preservation.
the most compellingly executed paintings of wildlife but also some of the most thoughtful insights into man’s relationship with the peaceable kingdom of animals. Of all his journeys, Africa was, perhaps, the most influential. He thought of it, in a way, as a primal Eden. When he first set foot there in 1956, he experienced a feeling of homecoming, of “having been here before.” Eight more trips to the continent followed.

Driven by curiosity as well as awe, Dick regarded wildlife with an almost mystical reverence, as in this passage from Other Edens: “Once, shaving before supper, I heard a large pride [of lions] pass close by. Their roaring was magnificent. I happened to look into the tin washbasin, and to my utter amazement, I saw concentric sound waves breaking the surface of the soapy water. I had been told that under the right conditions the roar of a lion can be heard for 10 miles. I believe it.”

It was on this trip that he befriended George and Joy Adamson, who later authored Born Free, the best-selling memoir about life on a Kenyan game preserve. Writing to Dick about a week after the artist had left Africa, George told him he had returned home with the skin of a lioness he had shot in self-defense. With him were three orphaned cubs, one of which would become the famous Elsa of that book.

More global adventures followed, very often into uncharted, or at least infrequently explored, territories. In Antarctica in 1966, Dick and his party slipped through Neptune’s Bellows, a narrow broken gap in the rim of a great flooded crater on Deception Island near the northwestern tip of Antarctica. “Bubbling fumaroles of steam blew white clouds into the cold air” as they walked out onto a flat lava rock apron. A colony of about 5,000 penguins, “all braying loudly,” slowly waddled down to the water and then returned with fish in their bills to feed their hungry young.

The hills of New Guinea, “burnt brown” by brush fires, were a topographic wonderland for Dick. At the time, most of the country was still completely primitive, isolated by mountain walls and torrential rivers. On the slopes of the mountain ranges, plants, birds, and mammals all lived close to each other, and birds of paradise with blood red plumes swept across the steep cliff walls.

Dick’s travels were not limited to exotic, foreign locales. At the King Ranch in Texas, one of the last estates of the baronial cattlemen, Dick spotted teal, cranes, and a Nilgai antelope. In the raucous environment of “dust, galloping hooves and the whooping and hollering of ranch hands,” Dick was witness to another ecosystem, both fragile and substantial in its own way, every bit as unique as the coves and volcanic hills of faraway lands.

**Dixie Diary**

Always, of course, he came home to paint and draw and write of his experiences in those “other Edens.” Dixie Plantation—862 acres ranging from pine forests to meadows to wetlands—was his sanctuary and the catalyst for his imagination. Photographer Tom
HIMALAYAN MONAL
OR
IMPEYAN PHEASANT
Blagden, who was very close to Dick and cites him as the most important voice of encouragement when he was just starting his career, recalls that Dixie was “a real living laboratory with all creatures, great and small—pheasants, cranes, waterfowl—and [Dick’s] pairs of Boxer dogs cavorting in the yard.” Dick, a big, rather gruff man with clear eyes, sun-lined skin, and silvery hair, would patrol the grounds regularly, both delighted and amazed at what he would witness. “It’s like a soap opera out here every day!” he used to say.

In the house, stacks of books vied for space on armchairs, already overflowing with drawings, photographs, and other artifacts. Wyeths and Shackletons were hung on the walls, but the epicenter was a picture window on the front of the building and behind it a massive desk where a man would sit patiently, writing and drawing each day.

Early on, he began a festive tradition of almost weekly Sunday lunch parties. There, one might come across the socialite Gertrude Legendre or Roger Torrey Peterson, a leader of the early environmentalist movement, or Dillon Ripley, head of the museums of the Smithsonian Institution. But one would also see packs of children running with the same ease and free spiritness as the wildlife who lived there. Jennet Robinson Alterman was one of them.

“The best part of the afternoon was—after the barbecue and the ice cream and the splashes in the swimming pool—being taken by John Henry on nature walks through the property,” she says. Dick was giving these young boys and girls arms akimbo and bathing suits dripping, their earliest lessons in natural history. “He was the first voice I ever heard that spoke to our environmental consciousness,” Alterman recalls.

Dick kept a record of these goings-on at Dixie, calling the seven leather-bound volumes he accumulated between 1947 and 1987 his “guest books.” The name is misleading, however, for the little miscellanies are more than logs of visitors; they are daily journals, birding records, notes, drawings, hand-painted maps, and tidbits of news from around the world—from a major development in the Vietnam War to the death of a favorite celebrity—squeezed between the covers. One page describes the
Dixie Plantation: The Legacy Continues

When John Henry Dick died in 1995, he left his beloved Dixie—as well as his rare bird books, paintings, slides, scrapbooks, and prints—to the College of Charleston (CoC) Foundation. Today, the Special Collections Library houses the written and artistic works, and the foundation is planning for the plantation’s use as an outdoor educational and research facility for environmental sciences and policies.

This summer, CoC received a $1 million grant from the Spalding-Paolozzi Foundation for two new field stations for environmental science research and instruction. With its diverse ecosystems, the center can now support Dick’s vision of a “living laboratory.” The college also has built a 4.3-mile interpretive walking trail, an interactive museum that will teach visitors about Dick’s work in conservation, and a new barn that will be both a classroom and a recreational facility.

A prior $140,000 grant from the Donnelley Foundation is helping to develop a comprehensive, three-year longleaf pine forest restoration and regeneration plan. CoC recently purchased 19.2 contiguous acres to act as a buffer between the environmentally pristine Dixie property and neighboring areas.

Together, these initiatives will result in the creation of almost 900 acres of environmentally protected property in a key area of the coastal lowlands. “Dixie will be restored to its original use by Mr. Dick as a wildlife sanctuary and working plantation,” says Mike Robertson, media relations director at CoC.

For more information on John Henry Dick’s collection of rare books, artwork, manuscripts, slides, and prints, visit spinner.cofc.edu/~speccoll.

typical Cuban diet: “stone crabs and planter’s punch.” Another has tipped into it mint-condition postage stamps from countries in the British Commonwealth depicting exotic birds. There are some personal notes as well. As he grew older, Dick sometimes commented on the state of his health, particularly his deteriorating eyesight, which resulted in several treatments at MUSC in the early 1980s: “Overwhelmed by the interest and warmth of countless friends,” he wrote.

The guest books, which Dick gave to the South Carolina Historical Society in 1982, total more than 1,300 pages of illustrations, observations, and scattered memoranda that make delightful reading—the equivalent today, perhaps, of a stylish Internet blog or a handmade chapbook. “Artistically,” Blagden says, “I think they were among his best work. He loosened up with them. They made him more expressive.”

The novels: Josephine Humphreys, a frequent visitor to Dixie, struggled to define the genre when she reflected on Dick and his private writings for a special 1997 issue of the Society’s Carologue magazine devoted to the books. It’s a record, Humphreys writes, of “a short stay in a rich, miraculous place. He always knew he was a guest himself—at Dixie or anywhere on the globe.”

It was a sad irony that Dick eventually died because of a disease associated with the loss of his eyesight. While the diagnosis of his illness was never certain, all of his friends believed that he gave up when he knew he would never regain his vision. “It was so central to his being,” Blagden says. “He seemed to withdraw inside himself from that point on.”

John Henry Dick died in September 1995, leaving his unbridled curiosity and unconditional willingness to teach others about the natural world as an inspiration for future generations. That legacy shines down on the sun-soaked landscapes of his paintings and drawings and on the gardens and forests of Dixie Plantation, his “other Eden.”