IN MEMORIAM:  
DR. GEORGE RADFORD MAYFIELD, JR.

On 18 August 1927, George Mayfield was practically born into the Tennessee Ornithological Society. The society had been founded only 12 years earlier by his father, George Sr., and four friends who shared an interest in organizing the study of birds in Tennessee. His mother, Lillie Hasslock Mayfield, was the first woman “permitted” to be a member of the society and served as its second secretary after her husband left for France during World War I.

George came by his interest in the outdoors and conservation through many other avenues. His mother taught high school biology for many years at the old Turner School, at Hume Fogg High School, and finally at Hillsboro High. Among her students were TOS notables Ben Coffey and Vernon Sharp. His father, in addition to being a TOS founder, served as a member of the Tennessee Conservation Commission and played a role in the establishment of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

His father also was one of the first birders to use sound to identify birds. Sound was a very important part of George’s life. He used it to identify birds, and he was
also an accomplished tenor singer and soloist. He joined the choir at West End United Methodist Church in 1942 and studied voice under the choir director, John Allyn Lewis. He later became the tenor soloist for the church and sang the tenor solos from Handel’s “Messiah” three times. During a later time, he served as the tenor soloist with the Seattle Philharmonic Symphony in performances of Puccini's “Missadì Gloria” and “Hora Novissima” by Parker. He also sang in “The Mikado.” His musical talents led him to meet Cleo Gillund at a rehearsal of Handel’s “Messiah” in Charleston, WV during his fourth year of pathology residency. They were married in July of 1960.

George graduated from Peabody Demonstration School (now University School of Nashville) in 1944. He then attended Vanderbilt University and graduated Magna cum Laude in 1950. He served two of those years in the US Army as an artillery officer in Japan, where he learned to ski under the tutelage of a man he referred to only as “Big Bear.” He returned to Vanderbilt and went on to medical school there, graduating in 1954. While in medical school, he was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha honorary scholarship fraternity. He then spent two years in Seattle, WA, in 1955-56, in internship and residency in pathology. While there he enjoyed skiing and salmon fishing. From there he moved back to Vanderbilt where he finished two more years of residency, and then it was on to Charleston, WV. His interest in watching birds was rekindled by regularly hearing Swainson’s and Golden-winged Warblers calling in the hollows near his home there. He joined the Brooks Bird Club, participated in many of their forays and outings, and made many lasting friends who much later taught him bird banding technique.

After he married Cleo, they moved back to Tennessee and settled in Columbia, where George began a career there as the first pathologist at Maury County Hospital. During his pathology tenure, he served as a president for the American Pathology Foundation and a delegate to the College of American Pathologists. He also served as a deputy chief medical examiner for Tennessee. He was an airplane pilot and served as the pathologist for several hospitals in the middle Tennessee area, using the plane as a means of commuting to these hospitals.

His piloting skills came in handy doing waterfowl surveys for bird counts. Many friends flew with him as he closely searched the lakes and ponds around Columbia. He began doing Christmas and spring bird counts in the area and recruited several friends to join him. This led to the founding of the Columbia chapter of the TOS. George was chapter president several times and also served as state president of TOS from 1968-70. During his tenure, Ken Dubke initiated fall seminar meetings and the society began sponsoring breeding season forays into areas of Tennessee that had historically received little attention from ornithologists. The first fall seminar meeting was held at Holiday Hills Resort near Crossville and it was agreed that future meetings would be held near the center of Tennessee and the I-40 corridor for the convenience of the greatest number of TOS members. The first foray was in Campbell County. The last meeting George presided over was at Mammoth Cave and was a joint meeting with Kentucky OS.
In later years, George obtained a master bander permit from the bird banding laboratory. There were many days spent banding, and he loved this endeavor. He banded in many locations — his home, his friends’ homes, in the hills and hollows in and around Columbia, and on his property in Lewis County near the Natchez Trace. In the late ’70s he began what would become a long term banding effort on Big Bald Mountain in Unicoi County, Tennessee. The 2004 season was the 25th year of its operation. George laid the foundation for this work and loved being at his mountain home in North Carolina for September. He became an authority on many of the fall warblers that migrated through the area, especially the Tennessee Warbler — he supervised the banding of thousands of them over the 23 years he was able to be there.

George’s many contributions to birding in the Columbia area and in Tennessee were honored several years ago through the renaming of the Columbia Chapter to the Mayfield-Gray chapter. He also was awarded the TOS lifetime service award which was presented to him by Wallace Coffey and other birding friends at his bedside during the last years of his battle with cancer.

At his memorial service, George was referred to as one who really cared about how others were treated. His employees from Maury County Hospital commented how often he was willing to go to bat for them with the administration. He was known for always stopping to give hitchhikers a ride. He was a staunch defender of wildlife and a conservationist, writing numerous letters to his congressmen and political leaders across the country.

He was a good father who fostered an appreciation for the outdoors in his children and many of their friends through Sunday afternoon hikes and picnics in Lewis County along Swan Creek and the Natchez Trace, camping trips to places like Prim Springs, a family favorite, and hikes on the Appalachian Trail. You could never go to any of his favorite beauty spots without taking a few minutes (or hours!) to gather all the trash that had accumulated since his last visit. He also took his family to places in the northwestern United States, his favorite part of the country aside from the hills and mountains of our own state and western North Carolina. Wherever he went on these outings, he paddled canoes, fished, and backpacked, while tracing the nation’s history, both natural and human. You couldn’t help but be affected by his thorough understanding of the travails of Lewis and Clark on their journey across the unexplored west. He vicariously relived their adventures in his own canoe and on foot. He regularly canoed on the Buffalo and Duck Rivers in middle Tennessee and introduced his family to whitewater paddling on the rivers of what is now the Big South Fork National Recreation Area. He championed the salvation of wild rivers from the rampant damming which occurred throughout his lifetime. He was deeply affected by the creation of Percy Priest Lake which eliminated his boyhood summer home on the Stones River where his parents had fostered in him an intense appreciation of natural beauty.
George was a good friend to many in the TOS, and he will be missed. He is survived by his wife, Cleo, of Columbia; two sons, George, III (Rad), and Mark; and a daughter, Rebecca. He also has 6 grandchildren, five girls and one boy.

I want to add just a few lines of some more personal items. First I want to say thanks to my mom, Cleo, and Mark and Rebecca for helping me write this memorial. I remember so many wonderful experiences (and I do mean EXPERIENCES!) related to birding with my father, as I am sure many of you do. I still remember how proud I was to go to TOS meetings with him as a child. Everybody knew him, and he loved the organization and the people whom he considered his friends. Those people are too many in number to thank personally for all the memories I have of him that they helped to create, so I will just say thank you from myself and my family for being our extended family and for being his friends. I know how important you and the TOS were to him. His passion for TOS was evidenced in his uncanny ability to remember names, and I was always aware of his conscious effort to acknowledge everyone, from the neophyte birders to the patriarchs of the society. I think if he could give any advice to you all, it would be to always make sure you enjoy your bird watching endeavors as he did. I know he would say to all of you, “Thanks for the memories!” I know I do!

God Bless! Rad Mayfield.