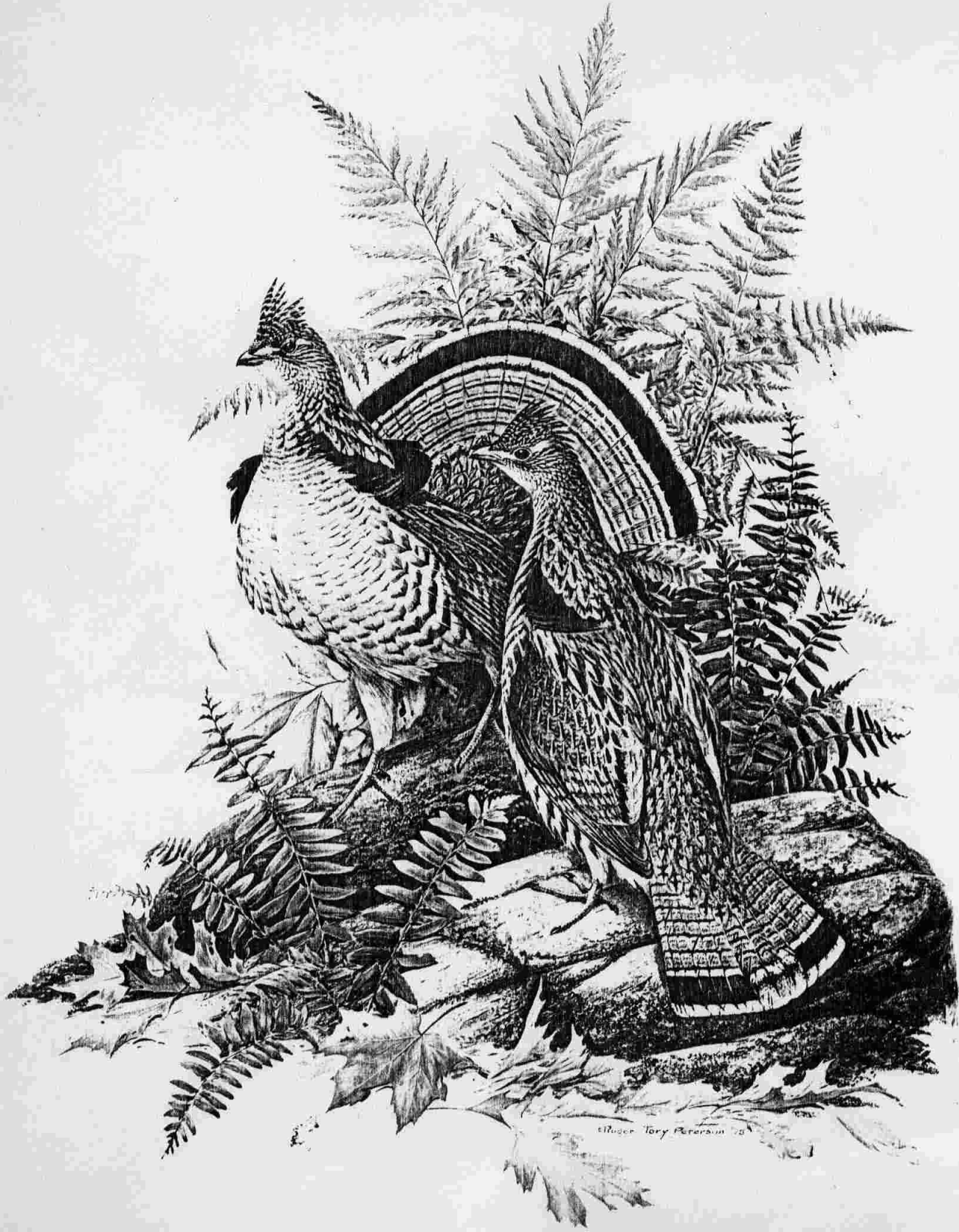


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Brooklyn Brigade

A 15-FOOT hurricane wall around New York City's Coney Island, punctuated by holes for viewing the ocean? That, in effect, is what the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed to build four years ago, even though only four major hurricanes have hit the area since the early 1700s. "The graffiti possibilities would have been unlimited," quips Brooklyn schoolteacher Harold Silverstein, who decided to study the ecological consequences of the proposed project. A subsequent report prepared by Silverstein and fellow John Dewey High School biologist Lou Siegel helped seal the plan's doom. Since then, Silverstein and his marine biology students (right) have conducted many additional studies, all aimed at protecting New York City marshlands from overdevelopment.

Today, the 48-year-old teacher and his students are considered such experts in marshland biology that they are inundated with requests from zoning boards and other agencies to examine possible building sites. They are also leading watchdogs of a landmark state law that recognizes the importance of marshes for wildlife habitat, pollution and flood control, recreation and education. To date, 16

of their detailed reports have been heard at local and U.S. environmental hearings — and most of their recommendations have been adopted.

"Too many environmental action groups concentrate on legal aspects and ignore the biological," says Silverstein, a native New Yorker who has taught school for 25 years. "We do an extensive microbiological study, using various types of scientific equipment to check ourselves." That equipment includes a fully equipped laboratory funded by a government grant.

"Typically, a high school student takes biology," says Silverstein, himself a Phi Beta Kappa, "then he's retrained in college. We decided to train them properly in the first place." Silverstein and Siegel have found the city's marshlands far better places to teach marine biology than classrooms.

The group's most ambitious project culminated last year when Silverstein's students challenged Exxon, Texaco, Shell, Chevron and 20 other petroleum firms over the discharge of waste oil into Jamaica Bay. At a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hearing, the John Dewey students presented data showing that the "concentration of oil pollutants [in Ja-



maica Bay] presently exceeds the levels prescribed by regulatory agencies." Silverstein proved how 1/10 parts per million (ppm) of oil in the water has a killing effect. As a result, the EPA tightened up its standards by 75 percent.

Currently, the Dewey students — profiled in a new book, *The Grass Roots Primer*, published by Sierra Club Books — are simultaneously studying three proposed wetlands projects, the largest load that they

have carried to date. But Silverstein has even greater goals in mind. "We'd like to have 100 schools studying marshlands," he comments, "and set up a data bank with more information on these ecological zones than has ever existed before. Then, any time a hearing came up we would have the data at our fingertips." For the pockets of wetlands still remaining in New York City, the future appears much brighter today.

— Mark Wexler