

Part 2

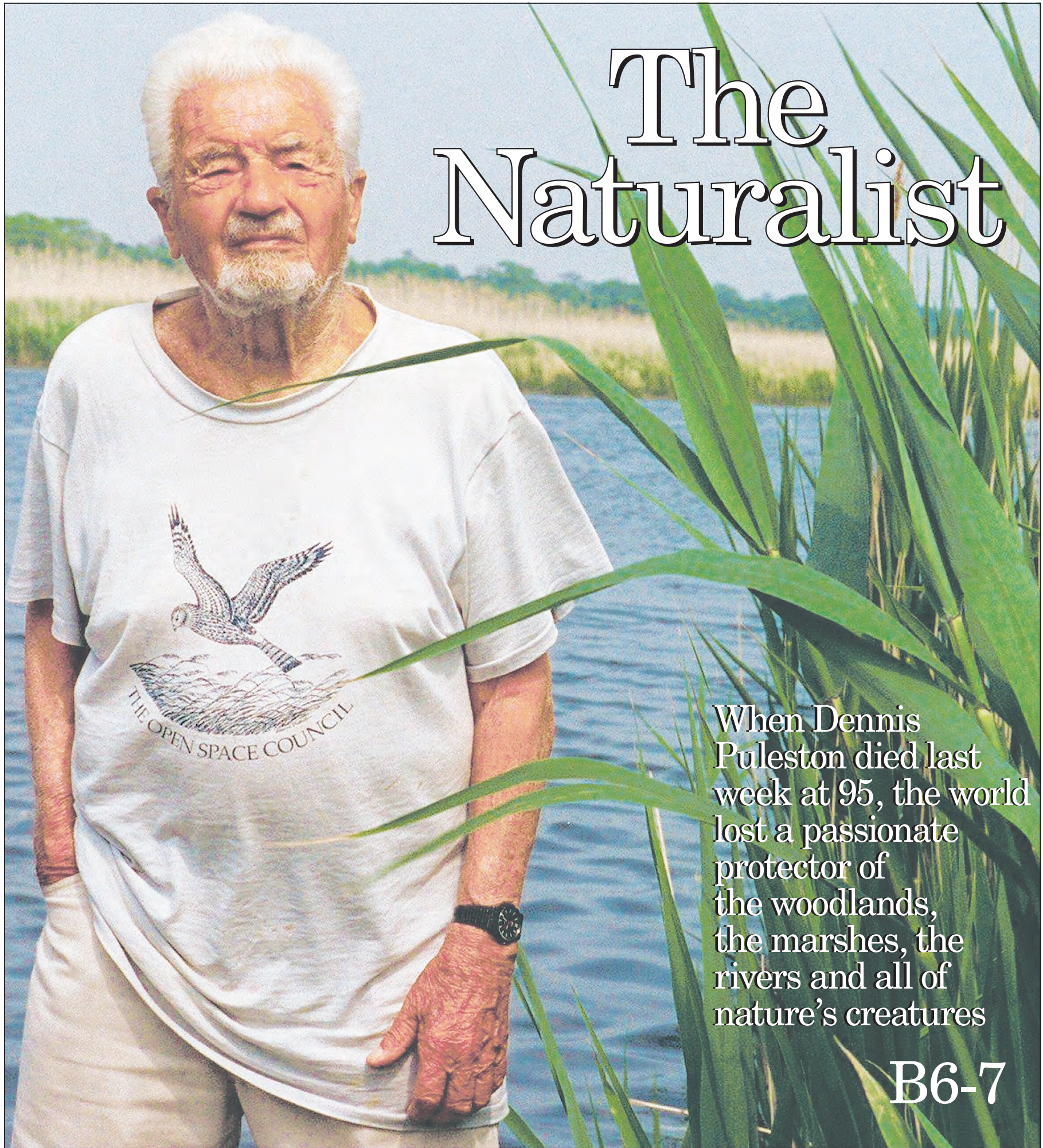


LIFESTYLES
FOOD
WEDNESDAY

Bubble Tea **B14**

A Cafe That Celebrates the Mind, B3

The Naturalist



When Dennis Puleston died last week at 95, the world lost a passionate protector of the woodlands, the marshes, the rivers and all of nature's creatures

B6-7

A Man of the Natural World



Birds were Dennis Puleston's particular joy. But all that nature offered was in his care during the 95 years of his adventurous life.

"And on the shore the wild doves mourn in the evening and then there comes a pang, some kind of emotional jar, and a longing. And if one followed his whispering impulse he would walk away slowly into the thorny bush following the call of the doves."

— John Steinbeck,

"The Log from the Sea of Cortez"

ALL HIS LIFE, Dennis Puleston heard the doves — the doleful call that signals spring. No wonder his family picked this quote from Steinbeck for his memorial card. The doves called to him of rebirth and the earth's awakening. Of green places and wild things. And oh how they sang.

I wish they would sing to me that way. I write about gardens and nature — about the living things that grow in the earth and rustle in the woods. But I have never heard what Dennis heard and when he died a little more than a week ago, I could only think what a loss it is for all of us who treasure this island we live upon. Who see the horseshoe crabs mating on the spring tides and contemplate ants and ospreys and search for wild orchids in the marshes and listen for the mourning doves.

The doves of Dennis Puleston's heart were not always doves, of course. Sometimes they were yellow-billed cuckoos and scarlet tanagers and wood thrushes and rufous-sided towhees. And the ospreys that he helped bring back from the brink of extinction to the Paumonok he loved as perhaps no walker of the woods and voyager of the bays and rivers has since Walt Whitman.

Throughout the days and nights of his 95 years — some of them spent in howling ocean storms and steaming jungles and frozen ice fields — the doves that called to Dennis Puleston took so many shapes. A golden-headed quetzal showing off its shimmering iridescent plumage in the Venezuelan cloud forest. Puffins swarming in the air like gigantic bumblebees on a desolate island off the coast of Norway. Chinstrap penguins mating in the shadow of a volcanic crater spewing smoke and ash in the South Sandwich Islands. A wandering albatross soaring in the wake of his ship as he cruised the Southern Ocean.

From the day he stared at the black-speckled blue eggs of a song thrush's nest as a 3-year-old in his native England and fell in love with birds to the final months of his long life, Dennis was always plunging into thorny bushes and looking at far horizons both real and remembered.

When he was 25, he embarked on a six-year round-the-world voyage in a 31-foot yawl. He sailed the South Seas with a 4-foot boa constrictor named Egbert coiled around his waist at the steering wheel. He dined with cannibals on the island of Ndeni and was kidnapped by armed natives on Espiritu Santa



At 25, Dennis Puleston embarked on a six-year around-the-world voyage. Above, circa 1933, he's at the wheel of the Marit, sailing from Newfoundland.

Island in the New Hebrides. He was tattooed with a shark's tooth by Samoans. He visited Antarctica 38 times — mostly in his later years as a cruise-ship naturalist, a job he took after he retired as director of technical information at Brookhaven National Laboratory. He voyaged to the North Pole on a nuclear-powered Soviet icebreaker, and when he reached the Transpolar Bridge, he drank a glass of champagne and took a quick swim that he called "the polar plunge."

As a naval architect with the wartime Office of Scientific Research and Development, Dennis helped develop the DUKW amphibious landing craft that brought troops ashore in World War II. He trained the servicemen who operated the 2½-ton vehicles and was wounded by shrapnel in Burma and received the Medal of Freedom. He was in the dunes at Normandy catching his breath and listening to the sounds of battle around him when he heard a skylark singing. "I was deeply moved by this one element of sanity in the whole mad business of war," he would write years later. "That bird made me realize that someday all this would be over and I could enjoy birds again the way I had always wanted to."

He came back to his adopted land of Long Island to enjoy them. No matter where he adventured, Dennis always came back to Long Island. He came back with his battered Bausch and Lomb binoculars and a poetic sensibility that never grew old. "Long Island is so much more than shopping malls, concrete high-



Three watercolor paintings by Puleston, who was the first chairman of the Environmental Defense Fund: from top, an osprey, white-winged crossbills, and common loons



Irene Virag

ways and crowded towns and beaches," he once wrote. "There are still cool woodlands, quiet rivers, salt marshes, overgrown meadows, and rolling sand dunes to be enjoyed by those who have the eyes to seek and the desire to learn about the other Long Island."

Dennis' book "A Nature Journal" is a bible of this other Long Island. But he did more than teach us about our natural world — he was a pioneer and a conscience in the fight to preserve it. He was the first chairman of the Environmental Defense Fund, which started on Long Island in 1967 and sued the Suffolk County Mosquito Control Commission to stop spraying DDT in local marshes. That led to a statewide and then a nationwide ban of the deadly pesticide. It all started with Dennis' observations of how DDT was affecting ospreys on Gardiners Island. He had never seen an osprey until he came to Long Island and he didn't want to lose them.

He also persuaded his friends Maurice and Cecile Wertheim to give their hunting preserve on the Carmans River in Shirley to the federal government as a



Puleston tours Wertheim Woods, circa 1955, with daughter Sally and son Peter. Puleston persuaded the Wertheim family to donate land near Carmans River in Shirley to the U.S. government as a wildlife refuge.

wildlife refuge. And he convinced his own mother-in-law to give part of the family acreage to further protect the river. Dennis and his wife, Betty, and their four children lived in a white cottage on the banks of the Carmans. He painted the ospreys that nested on a platform in the marsh not far from the house and took in a menagerie of creatures that ranged from a turkey vulture to a pregnant turtle.

He was a writer and a painter and a botanist and an ornithologist. Birds were his particular joy. He heard them with an inner ear. I would give almost anything to be able to sense nature as he did. Especially in a place deep in the Pine Barrens that he named Warbler Woods, a forested oasis in Yaphank where Neotropical songbirds come to breed. I walked there recently with one of his friends, Marilyn England, the president of the Open Space Council that Dennis helped found and the director of the Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary in Oyster Bay. I was afraid of deer ticks, nervous about poison ivy and plagued by giant mosquitoes. I saw a red-eyed vireo

and an Acadian flycatcher and the redder-than-a-cardinal flash of a scarlet tanager in the treetops, but I knew that nothing would have bothered Dennis and that he would have seen and heard volumes more.

"I'd meet him on the trail during spring migration, and he'd be so excited," Marilyn told me. "He'd talk about an experience he had four or five years ago. It was fall and he was canoeing on the Carmans River when a huge flock of tree swallows — thousands of birds — flew up from the wetlands and were swirling all around him. He was amazed. Whenever I saw him he'd say, 'Did I tell you about the tree swallows?' I'd say, 'Yes.' And he'd smile and tell me again. He never lost his awe at the wonder of it all, he never got tired of it."

"He could see birds with his ears," said Steve Englebright, the state senator who is a geologist and a naturalist and fought alongside Dennis to save the Pine Barrens. "I remember him in Warbler Woods in 1980 or '81. It was the first time I was in the field with a gifted birder. He whistled and made birdcalls, and he was talking to a half-dozen species of warblers and pointing out others too quick for me to see. I mean, I was a geologist — rocks don't move that fast."

"When he was on the edge of the Carmans River, it was like he was part of the ecosystem," the senator said. "He was a sweet, sweet, unassuming man who left a legacy of green on our island that will never go away."



Newsday Photo / Thomas A. Ferrara

Puleston's wife, Betty, right, with their daughters, Sally McIntosh, left, and Jennifer Clement, at their home in Brookhaven hamlet.

We were talking on the phone and I could hear Steve Englebright crying.

THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS who knew Dennis Puleston admire his oneness with nature. John Turner, a naturalist and director of conservation programs for The Nature Conservancy, recalls the first time he met Dennis. "I was a young birder in my late teens. I saw him as I was walking into his most treasured place, Warbler Woods. 'What did you see?' I asked. He stopped and talked to me, just small talk, but I couldn't believe I was talking to Dennis Puleston. Years later, I was at a meeting — it was one of the first planning sessions of the Pine Barrens task force — and I looked over at Dennis. He was sketching an American kestrel. It was beautiful, perfectly proportioned, and he was drawing it from memory."

Art Cooley, another founding member of the Environmental Defense Fund, was a fledgling teacher when he met Dennis 55 years ago. "We went on a birding trip and Dennis said, 'Next time, bring along some of your students.' That started 20 years of field trips. Dennis was a natural teacher. Just three weeks ago, I heard him teaching his nurse how to identify the yellow finches and grackles and house sparrows in the backyard."

A nurse was helping Dennis when I visited him a year ago. He said he'd been slowed down by heart surgery. His hearing was failing, but he got on an exercise bike every day and he still turned out the faithful and lovely paintings of the birds that sustained his spirit. We talked about wild turkeys and tiger salamanders and brown tide and over-fishing and the dwarf beech forest endangered by a proposed golf course in Riverhead. "Why we need another golf course I don't know," he said, his voice strengthening, and I could imagine him with his fellow environmentalists in the small office in Stony Brook where the anti-DDT fight began with the motto "Sue the bastards."

He told me about meeting his wife. It was the summer of '34 and Dennis was taking a break from his round-the-world voyage, working as a sailing instructor at the American Yacht Club in Rye. Betty Wellington, soon to be a student at Bennington College, was competing in the women's sailing championships for the Great South Bay racing team when she tumbled overboard into Long Island Sound. Dennis jumped in to rescue her. "Are you all right?" he



To read a previously unpublished Letter to the Future from Dennis Puleston, go on the Internet to Newsday.com/features

A Man of the Natural World

PULESTON from B6

asked. “I’m fine,” she said. “How are you?”

Betty — whose family had residences in New York City and the hamlet of Brookhaven — kept up with Dennis through his letters to the yacht club commodore, who turned out to be the father of her college roommate. When Dennis returned to give a lecture three years later, they made a date. But the malaria he’d contracted during his voyage flared up and he had to cancel. “My dates weren’t coming up with those kind of excuses every day,” Betty said last week when I stopped by the cottage again. On Feb. 2, 1939, they married. After an adventurous honeymoon sailing to Tahiti, they set up housekeeping on the banks of the Carmans.

From the start, life at home was filled with creatures great and small. Dennis rescued a mourning dove that had fallen out of its nest. Betty kept ivy plants on either side of the fireplace and that’s where the bird roosted. “When we were first married and living on \$60 a month, we invited the local doctor over for tea,” she remembered. “The mourning dove flew out of the ivy, landed on the table and walked all over the cakes. The doctor politely refused the cakes, but we ate them later.”

Dennis’ four children all became naturalists. His oldest, Dennis Edward, a 38-year-old anthropology professor, was killed in 1978 when he was struck by lightning on a Mayan pyramid in the Yucatan. Jennifer Clement raises alpacas on the property next to her parents and has followed her father as a naturalist on adventure cruises all over the world. Peter, also an onboard naturalist, lives on a farm in New Brunswick, Canada, where his sister, Sally McIntosh, works at a nature center.

AS KIDS, they didn’t have to go outdoors to find the natural world. Dennis had a pet turkey vulture that he named Alger because the bird hissed. He would come to the dinner table with Alger on his shoulder. “This was a bird with a 6-foot wingspan,” Sally told me as the sisters remembered life with father. “One day, Alger grabbed the steak right off the serving platter in the middle of the table.” Art Cooley remembers a day more than 30 years ago when he found Dennis snoozing at his easel, paintbrush in hand. Alger was perched on Dennis’ shoulder — sound asleep as well.

There was the injured nighthawk that roosted on a log in their fireplace and that they fed dried flies. And the turtle that crawled into the house and laid eggs under the piano. Betty was in the hospital giving birth to one of her daughters. The day she came home, the turtle eggs hatched. “Guess who got more attention,” she said with a chuckle.

Every morning, Dennis would go on a mile-long walk along the marsh. He’d take his binoculars and his notebook and his pet sheep. On the weekends, there were field trips — usually with Art Cooley and his students to special places on Long Island where the tiger salamanders bred and the warblers sang and the woodcocks

called. The children would keep journals and make reports on the ferns and mushrooms and wildflowers they saw in the woods.

“Even when we were really little, he always made us feel special,” said Sally. “He’d say, ‘Oh, you’re so lucky, you have small hands so you’re the only one who can reach up into the nest and count the eggs.’ And he’d lift you up high so you could see.” When he banded birds, Dennis let the children hold them and feel the softness of their feathers and the flutter of life and release them into the sky.

It’s not surprising that spring was his favorite time of year. There was the annual pilgrimage to hear the spring peepers and see the mating dance of the woodcock. Jen and Sally are in their 50s, but they reached back for childhood in front of me as they imitated and described the chirps and beeps of the courtship ritual. “And he loved apple blossoms,” Jen said. “He’d lie on his back under the apple tree and soak in the blossoms like he’d never seen or smelled them before.”

At night, while the children did their homework, Dennis sat at his easel painting birds. Classical music swelled in the cottage — the operas of Puccini and Verdi, the magic of Beethoven and Brahms and Mozart. “He always said the American redstart sounded with the first three notes of ‘The Barber of Seville,’” said Art Cooley.

Dennis was well into his 80s when he went on his last nature cruise. By the time he was 90, he’d painted 230 species of birds that live on or visit Long Island. When he was 86, he turned his diary into “A Nature Journal” for his children and their children — there are seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren with another on the way. One of his granddaughters, Shelly Clevidence, who is 32 and lives in Portland, Ore., is pregnant with her first child. She came home four months ago to spend the dwindling time with the man who taught her to drive and told her nature stories.

“Once he had us out on a 14-mile hike on Gardiners Island and he kept us going with Tarzan stories,” Shelly said. “They all had an environmental twist, of course — like Tarzan was saving the jungle from a conglomerate.”

Last winter, Dennis wrote a note to the friends and family members who would celebrate his 95th birthday. “I have survived assaults on my carcass by Brookhaven Hospital, shipwreck, open heart surgery, Japanese shell fire, malaria and sundry other attacks. I am living on borrowed time.” His birthday actually fell on Dec. 30, but as he wrote in his trembling but clear script, “we are celebrating it on Saturday, November 11 because Jen and Pete will be working in Antarctica later in the month and I didn’t want them to miss it. P.S. Please don’t grieve for me when I’m gone. It has been a wonderful life, and further cause for celebration.”

Dennis touched the barnacle-encrusted head of a gray whale in a foreign sea but found enough beauty in his own backyard to make Long Island his homeport. He was a walker in Pausanias and he wanted nothing so much as to preserve it. We should all listen for the warblers and watch for the ospreys and remember Dennis Puleston. ■