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Review of 'My Way to Ornithology' by Olin Pettingill, Jr.

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BOOK REVIEW

Olin Pettingill Jr. 1992. **My Way to Ornithology.** University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK. 245 pages; $24.95.

Most Nebraskans who recognize this author's name probably will remember him as a cinematographer and lecturer in the Audubon Screen Tour series. The series was a regular part of live entertainment in Lincoln and Omaha until the early 1960s.

Other bird-oriented people will know that Pettingill wrote two of the first - and still best - regional bird-finding books (detailed guidebooks to bird-finding localities in the states east and west of the Mississippi, respectively). Perhaps still others will remember him as a one-time teacher of ornithology at Carleton

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College and the University of Michigan Biological Station, or as a director of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University.

Pettingill, now retired, has written a detailed and generally interesting autobiographical account of how he literally found his way into becoming a professional ornithologist when this field scarcely existed as such.

He maintained a personal journal from an early age; thus he was able to provide a wealth of detail on his activities from childhood. This well-documented book covers only the period from the time of his birth in 1907 until 1934, when he left for Carleton to begin his first major college-teaching job.

By virtue of its great detail, I was able to determine, for example, that at the time I was born in late June, 1931, Pettingill was observing and photographing subarctic shorebirds near Churchill, Manitoba, having just completed his first year of graduate studies in ornithology at Cornell University. (About 25 years later I, too, would become a graduate student in ornithology at Cornell, and some years after that I would be spending late June studying shorebirds near Churchill.)

Pettingill provides a personal example of what the study of natural history was like in those pre-war years, when most ornithologists carried a shotgun as well as binoculars to confirm their bird records, when the first field guides were just becoming available for bird identification, and when equipment for nature photography was still extremely primitive.

In his formative years he was influenced by a few teachers, notably a high-school teacher of English, who inspired him to become a writer, and especially a professor of biology at Bowdoin College, who introduced him to field ornithology. At that time, nearly all ornithological research involved life-history studies, a kind of formalized natural history.

Together with the increasingly effective field-guide series created by Roger T. Peterson, Pettingill and a few others gradually altered bird watching in North America from a rather strange activity of a few seemingly quirky people into a major national, and increasingly even international, pastime to be enjoyed by all social classes.

Readers of this book, even if they cannot make personal associations with the many people named in it, probably can find interest and pleasure in seeing how a few pivotal model figures, appearing at a critical time, can constructively shape and give direction to a person's life.

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