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Beguiled by Birds: A Profile of Paul Johnsgard

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Profile

Beguiled by Birds*

by James L. Hayward

For author, artist, and scientist Paul Johnsgard, a lifetime passion has fueled a prolific career

"I spent the first thirty years of my life learning to be a scientist, and the next twenty-five years of my life trying to become a humanist and an artist." Paul Johnsgard immerses himself in several worlds, but for the eclectic teacher, writer, artist, and scientist, these worlds merge in a burst of feathered movement, color, and shape. Johnsgard is beguiled by birds.

As a professor of biological sciences at the University of Nebraska with full teaching responsibilities, Johnsgard has managed to write at least one or two books on birds each year. In 1986 I asked him if he thought he'd ever equal the prodigious output of Arthur Cleveland Bent, an earlier bird biographer. "Oh," he replied nonchalantly, "I passed up Bent some time ago." Indeed, Johnsgard is the most prolific author in the history of ornithology. His volumes dominate the ornithological collections of most libraries.

Johnsgard's passion for birds developed when he was a boy growing up in North Dakota. His family was of modest means, but his mother encouraged her son to appreciate the natural world. He collected rocks, minerals, and plants, tended a wild-

flower garden, and learned to identify birds using his mother's set of Reed bird guides. He also recalls that his first-grade teacher had a mounted, male Red-winged Blackbird in a glass case. "I can remember that as if it were yesterday," he says. "I think that was an important aspect of wanting to see birds up close."

When Johnsgard was eight, his family moved to Wahpeton, south of Fargo, a town big enough for a public library. Like most boys his age, young Paul liked adventure stories, but he had a special fondness for natural history books, particularly those on mammals and birds.

"I was very shy, very self-contained," Johnsgard remembers. "My idea of having fun was going off in the woods and looking for wildflowers or watching birds. I was quite content just being by myself. I was no good at intramural sports so I spent a lot of time in the library, a lot of time drawing, a lot of time reading." He also took up photography and began chronicling his wildlife pursuits on black-and-white film with a 35mm Exakta camera.

A distant cousin, Bud Morgan, introduced Paul to the more professional aspects of biology. Morgan, a game warden, began taking the boy on spring duck counts and helped him identify the different species. A few years later, when Morgan became director of the North Dakota Game and Parks Department, he published one of Paul's photographs of pintails on the back cover of *North Dakota Outdoors*. This was Johnsgard's first "publication."

After finishing high school and two years of junior college in Wahpeton, Johnsgard enrolled as a zoology major at North Dakota State University with the intention of entering wildlife management. One of his professors, Frank Cassel, a Cornell University graduate, saw potential in the eager student and encouraged him to consider a career in ornithology. Johnsgard was surprised but delighted to learn that a person could study birds for a living. He decided he would specialize in waterfowl biology.

Johnsgard chose to do his master's degree at Washington State University. For his thesis he examined how changes in water levels brought about by the recently constructed O'Sullivan Dam

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affected bird populations in the Potholes region of central Washington. He also collected data on sex ratios and courtship rituals among waterfowl of the region. Johnsgard reported his observations in an article for the journal *Condor* in 1955, illustrating the piece with his own drawings, a practice that was to become standard in later years.

The *Condor* article caught the attention of Cornell University's Charles Sibley, who at the time was studying the evolution of duck behavior. "It was an interesting paper," wrote the Cornell professor to Johnsgard, "but you obviously are not aware of the work of Konrad Lorenz, who published a very extensive paper on courtship behavior in the dabbling ducks. "After chastising the embarrassed young scientist for the oversight, Sibley invited Johnsgard to consider doing a Ph.D. under him at Cornell.

Johnsgard was elated with the prospect. Cornell enjoyed a distinguished reputation, and many of North America's prominent bird specialists had worked there—Arthur Alien, Peter Kellogg, Albert Brand, and Frank Chapman. Moreover, Sibley's work on the origins of avian diversity was attracting serious attention from the biological community. With Sibley's endorsement, Johnsgard was accepted to Cornell.

Under Sibley's mentorship, Johnsgard tackled a problem involving the origins of six closely related ducks—the Mallard, Black Duck, Florida Duck, Mottled Duck, Mexican Duck, and New Mexican Duck. After an impressive piece of ornithological detective work, Johnsgard concluded that the six varieties represent only two closely related species, the Mallard and the Black Duck. The other four types are merely sub-species of the Mallard.

Upon completing his Ph.D., Johnsgard headed to England for a two-year post-doctoral fellowship at the Wildfowl Trust in Gloucestershire, England. Peter Scott, founder of the trust, had assembled most of the 145 living species of ducks, geese, and swans at the facility. Johnsgard was in his element. He analyzed the behavior of 133 species of these birds, a gargantuan project

that provided data for a bevy of technical papers. Most importantly, this experience culminated in what has since become a classic reference work: Johnsgard's *Handbook of Waterfowl Behavior*, published by Cornell University Press in 1965.

"There is no doubt that Professor Johnsgard's work will be widely acclaimed as a fine achievement," reported the *New York Review of Books*. "[It] should be in the library of everyone with an interest in keeping waterfowl. Taxonomists in our great museums cannot afford to ignore it." This unexpected but unequivocal endorsement by a leading literary magazine catapulted Johnsgard from the obscurity of field biology to the world of editors, publishing awards, and book signings. Johnsgard began to view himself as a writer as much as a biologist.

During his last year in England, Johnsgard received a letter from Sibley suggesting that he apply for a teaching job at the University of Nebraska, where a position had opened up in the zoology department. Johnsgard had never been to Nebraska, though he knew it was a good state for waterfowl. He applied for and got the job without so much as an interview and has been there ever since.

Johnsgard's years at the University of Nebraska have been good to him. In the late 1960s he earned the university's Distinguished Teaching Award. This was followed by a Regents Professorship and the Outstanding Research and Creative Activity Award. Other honors and awards include two National Science Foundation grants, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the Fulbright-Hays Award, the Mari Sandoz Literature Award, and the Loren Eiseley Award. Most importantly, Johnsgard's professorship has served as a support base for production of his 33 books, one for every year he's been on the faculty.

Johnsgard's best prose reflects the influence of Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard. For example, reading of a wounded Snow Goose downed by buckshot in his fictional work, *Song of the North Wind*, we feel Johnsgard's deep passion, sense of mystery, and appreciation of life:

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Lying helplessly on her back, feet still uselessly paddling the air, she cannot see that the bloody wound on her abdomen has stained her entire underparts with red. Drawing on her last remaining strength, she raises her head and through dimming eyes gains a final glimpse of white-headed father passing above. Then her feet slowly cease their paddling, her body gives a final convulsive quiver, and she is dead. Overhead, white feathers torn from her body by the fusillade of gunfire still drift in the wind, eventually settling and floating as lightly as phalaropes on the surface of the lake.

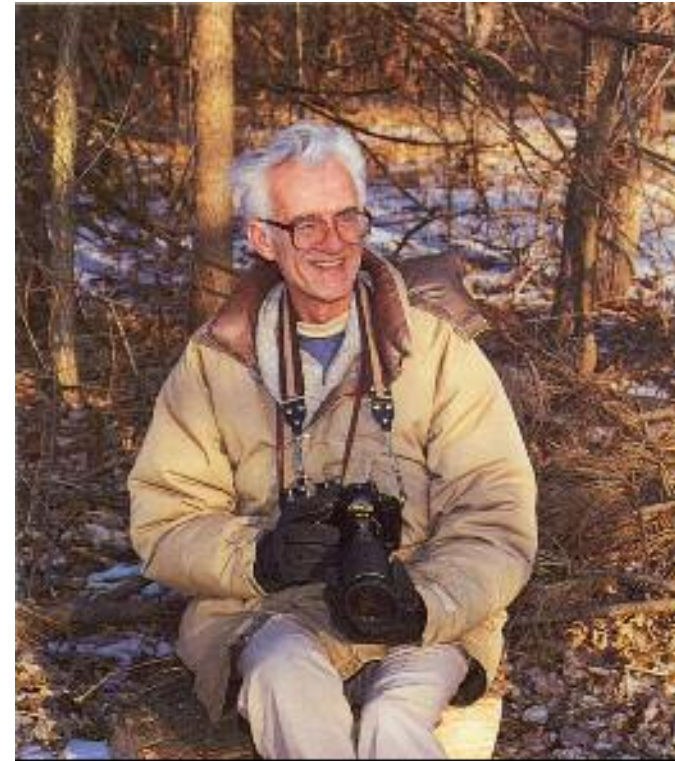
In 1984 Johnsgard found himself wounded, downed by a near-fatal heart attack in his Lincoln office. The lean, active nonsmoker seemed an unlikely candidate for heart disease. But lying in a hospital bed soon after the attack, he realized that eight books were probably too many to work on at one time. Upon returning home he temporarily put aside his demons and carved the life-sized Trumpeter Swan that now hangs from his office ceiling.

Johnsgard recovered with remarkable speed and a decade later continues to exude boundless energy. I called him recently to find out about his latest projects. "My book on arena behavior just came out," he said. "Another book concerning the natural history of the Nebraska sandhills should be out in a few months. It's in the form of narrative poetry, so it's been harder to write." Other books in preparation deal with the biology of stiff-tailed ducks and a world review of brood parasitism. He plans to "retire" in 1996. Maybe after that he'll travel to develop new ideas for more books.

"I wouldn't change my life in any way," says Johnsgard.

James Hayward teaches biology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Paul Johnsgard: Beguiled by Birds



A photograph of pintails was Paul Johnsgard's first "publication." Thirty-three books later, he's still documenting bird behavior.

James L. Hayward

A selection of books by Paul Johnsgard

Dragons & Unicorns: A Natural History. New York: St. Martin's Press; 1982.

The Hummingbirds of North America. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; 1983.

The Cranes of the World. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press; 1983.

Diving Birds of North America. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press; 1987.

North American Owls. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1988

Hawks, Eagles and Falcons of North America. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; 1990.

Crane Music. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; 1991.

Bustards, Hemipodes and Sandgrouse: Birds of Dry Places. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1991.

Arena Birds: Sexual Selection and Behavior. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; 1994.