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THE AMATEUR: FINDING A NICHE IN ORNITHOLOGY*

The older branches of science were all pioneered by amateurs, but as they matured they have moved steadily away from the reach of the individual working alone with his own resources. As the need for laboratories, observatories, and support staff have grown, science has become increasingly the province of professionals and institutions.

In ornithology, however, the amateur is still a significant figure. Perhaps no other branch of science owes so much to the amateur, not only in current contributions, but also in continuing to produce the professionals of the future. Can we think of another field where we could make a similar statement? We should not forget that nearly all professionals in this discipline began as bird watchers. In other fields most eminent men did not meet the subjects of their ultimate specialization until they were launched in their professional careers. Even in biology, it would be hard to find a scientist who traces his origins to an early love of fruit flies or mice.

Throughout this discussion I am using the term amateur to mean someone who studies birds only as a part-time avocation while carrying on a full-time occupation in another field.

Instead of speculating about the roles that amateurs might play in ornithology, I will focus on actual people who have been in the forefront of ornithology while earning their livings at something else. For my selection, I have limited myself to people I have known personally in my own lifetime. Another author would have picked others. The possible examples are almost innumerable.

My first category[†] is the keeper of records. These are the people who chronicle bird life in each locality, and thus provide the record of changes over the decades. These are the monitors of bird populations, and without them historians, ecologists, public health specialists, and other scientists would be groping to appraise long-term trends in our environment.

For my prime example, I take my friend Louis W. Campbell. For more than 60 years he has presided as the acknowledged authority on birds of the Toledo, Ohio region. Through his own meticulous observations and the screening of reports of others, he has built up a comprehensive account of the birds of this locality. His more important observations were recorded in national journals, and items of local interest were published in newspapers, particularly the *Toledo Times*, where he wrote an outdoor column for 33 years. The public also knows him from 1,200 lectures before groups of all kinds. His bird records are summarized annually in the Toledo Naturalists' Association yearbook, and comprehensively in his monograph, *Birds of Lucas County*, in 1940, and followed up by *Birds of the Toledo Area*, in 1968. Both are models of completeness and accuracy. His grasp of the local scene is broad,

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[†] Spelled "category" in *The Loon*.

embracing its history, geology, botany, and zoology generally. Needless to say, he has been an inspiration to generations of young naturalists. For fifty years, until retirement, he worked as transportation engineer for the local transit company. At no time was he employed as naturalist or biologist.

My second category is the life-history specialist. The focus and the pace of modern biology has pushed life history studies into the background among academic and institutional ornithologists. This is not a quick way to fame. The comprehensive study of a species is slow and often unexciting. It is usually beyond the time allotted for a graduate student and it does not always yield the profound insights esteemed in professional circles. Testing narrow hypotheses is quicker.

Still, there are famous names in this category. We cannot touch on it without mentioning Margaret More Nice and Arthur Cleveland Bent. And yet neither of them, exactly fit the model I am presenting. Mrs. Nice, the scholar and authority on the Song Sparrow, could hardly be called a part-time ornithologist. She herself bristled at being labeled a housewife. Although she was one, she was able to arrange her personal affairs so that she could spend endless hours and days in her field studies, and she did not provide the family livelihood. Bent at one time may have been a businessman, but, during the decades he devoted to *Life Histories of North American Birds*, he was financially secure and gave his full time to this task. These people are already celebrated, and their opportunities were unique.

Instead, I will single out Lawrence H. Walkinshaw, a full-time dentist with a flourishing practice in Battle Creek, Michigan. The first time I visited him it was in his office, and, the way I tell it, he came out to see me leaving a patient with a mouthful of instruments, but he denies this. He had a lifelong passion for the living bird. He was a genius at finding nests, and tireless in the field. His notes were models of thoroughness, and he published his findings completely. Much of his field work he accomplished before other people were up, and much of his writing was done after other people were in bed. He concentrated on birds near at hand. Perhaps his greatest study centered on an abandoned farm near his house, where in the course of many years he completed a definitive work on Field Sparrows. Within his county he found nesting Sandhill Cranes, and his attention to them led to four books on this species. Although at the very limit of the range of the Prothonotary Warbler, he was able to mount a study of the bird. On weekends and vacations he was able to give attention to the Kirtland's Warbler, and his nest records spanning more than 50 years provided material for two books on this rare creature.

Another category in which amateurs have left their mark is in the editing—perhaps I should say nurturing—of regional journals. If you will glance at a collection of state bird journals, I think you will find that nearly all of them are edited by dedicated amateurs. Any such modern list probably should be headed by George Hall, editor of the *Wilson Bulletin* for ten years. His adult life has been spent as a professor of chemistry at West Virginia University, but he will also be best remembered as the authority on the birds of that state and author of *West Virginia Birds*.

For my prime example here I am singling out Robert B. Janssen of Minneapolis. As editor of *The Loon*,[†] (formerly *The Flicker*), the journal of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, for 32 years, he is probably the senior

[†] The journal title is in bold and italic type in the original.

ornithological editor in America. In that position he has provided leadership for a variety of activities. He has headed the state records committee, and he has initiated a hotline for spreading the news of notable events. The information he has gathered made possible his 1987 *Birds of Minnesota*. His lifetime fascination with birds has not prevented him from pursuing a successful career in business. He has worked as a salesman and executive in a company engaged in the manufacture of envelopes.

Few amateurs can travel to the ends of the earth in their studies, but many, especially those who are city dwellers, have access to fine libraries. This brings me to my next category, the library scholar. A sparkling example is the late A. W. Schorger of Madison, Wisconsin. Bill Schorger spent untold hours in late afternoons and evenings in the dusty shelves of the state historical society library, combing through old newspapers for eyewitness accounts of birds in pioneer days. A weary librarian once said to him, "I have moved more tons of paper for you than for any other person in the state of Wisconsin." Years of delving in the newspaper archives formed the basis for his definitive works on the Passenger Pigeon and the Wild Turkey, long after both species had been extirpated from his region. Among many of his associates he was known as a paper chemist and business executive in paper manufacturing. In that career also he was a distinguished member, with many patents to his credit.

A particularly valuable segment of amateurs in ornithology consists of those who are competent in the physical sciences and mathematics, talents that are in short supply among biologists generally. As among professionals, good ideas often emerge where disciplines intersect.

Here I think first of my friend, the late Frank W. Preston, of Butler, Pennsylvania. A glass technologist and mathematician, he approached every bird question from a novel, analytical angle, with conclusions that were always out of the ordinary. He was a problem solver, intrigued by statistical topics, like the mathematical representation of egg shapes, the commonness and rarity of species, the distribution of the heights of bird nests, and atmospheric phenomena among birds in long-distance flights. At the same time he established and directed a consulting firm that did research in glass technology and built testing devices used by the glass industry throughout the world.

Another distinguished example in this category is Crawford Greenewalt, a chemical engineer and business executive, whose inventive use of high-speed photography led to new insight into hummingbirds, which he treated in a beautiful and scholarly book that is a collector's item. His analysis of bird sounds led him to examine the mechanism by which birds produce those sounds, and his study of bird flight led him to consider the relationship between size and shape of birds and the aerodynamics of flapping flight. He addressed each of these topics in monographs that are highly respected by scientists. During a part of this time he was the president of DuPont de Nemours of Wilmington, Delaware.

Such examples ought to inspire birders to ask themselves if they have special talents in other fields that might be brought to bear on ornithological problems.

Finally, I mention with gratitude the legion of anonymous birders who are the foot soldiers of ornithology. No large cooperative project would be possible without them—censusing, banding, preparing of atlases, and building the historical records of each locality. Their names seldom occur in bibliographies. They are the unknown soldiers of this science.

Thus, in summary, I have enumerated some examples of amateurs who have found a niche in ornithology where they can perform valued service: (1) the keepers of the local records; (2) people who made particular birds their own through life history studies; (3) editors who have guided local and regional journals through decades; (4) library scholars combing the archives for historical information; (5) people with training in the physical sciences and mathematics who have turned this knowledge to the benefit of ornithology; and (6) the legion of anonymous helpers who make all large cooperative projects possible.

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