Robert Cushman Murphy

April 9, 1936

On my "birding table," amid a clutter of field guides, journals, newsletters, and notebooks, are two fat green volumes, containing over 1,200 pages. These books seem so out of place - what would a casual Massachusetts birder find in Oceanic Birds of South America? The answer is easy: an exemplary description of what a field ornithologist should seek, should study, and should record. And is not every birder a field ornithologist? By learning the observational techniques of author Robert Cushman Murphy, one also learns to better appreciate the behavior and habits of all birds. His monumental work has also engendered my fascination with pelagic species.

Sadly, 60 years of wide-ranging expeditions ended for Mr. Murphy on March 19th. Since 1921 he had been affiliated with the American Museum of Natural History eventually becoming curator of birds and leading his department to world preeminence.

As a result of his researches, Mr. Murphy was able to demonstrate that species of ocean birds are very dependent on particular combinations of weather, currents, water temperature, and endemic food supply, resulting in specific life-zones. In other words, birds may seem free to go where they choose, but in fact they are controlled by planetwide ecological regimes - a truth pertinent to all animal life and one that is only now being realized.

Perhaps a birder could pay no greater tribute to Mr. Murphy than to recall that through his efforts a species believed extinct for 300 years was brought back to life. In 1951, he organized a search party that located the remnant of a once flourishing colony of Cahows, nesting in the rocky crevices of Bermuda's off-shore islands. This timely discovery, together with persistent efforts by others, has maintained the colony, though its future is still most uncertain.

Someday I may see a Cahow, and when I do, I will again remember Robert Cushman Murphy.

L.J.R.

PEREGRINE UPDATE

Someday it may be said that a bird saved mankind. The catastrophic decline of the peregrine falcon (Falco peregrinus) focused world attention on our unintentional, ignorant, and profound destruction of the environment.

In the Western Hemisphere, the peregrine is one of the most monitored birds, as if its population and breeding success were an ecological barometer. Greenland was the only major geographical area endemic to the peregrine that lacked an accurate census. But last year a team from five United States institutions, headed by W. G. Mattox, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and R. A. Graham, U.S. Air Force, established a base upon which this species viability can be judged.

As reported in Arctic, Vol. 25, No. 4, these birds are in a healthy state: "The status of the peregrine is better in West Greenland than in other areas of the north." They found an average of one nesting pair per 100 square miles, with an average production of 2¼ young per eyrie.

Incidentally, there is little interspecific competition between peregrines and gyrfalcons; the latter seem to prefer lower nesting sites on the cliffs. Neighboring ravens are relegated to even lower sites.

L.J.R.