

RALPH HOFFMANN: FATHER OF THE MODERN FIELD GUIDE

by Bruce A. Sorrie

In a recent issue of *Bird Observer* (14: 284, December 1986) I read with interest the article by Richard K. Walton on early field guides, especially Catesby's benchmark work. As one who has been interested in the development of the modern identification guide, I would like to point out a major omission. Ralph Hoffmann, not Roger Tory Peterson, should be regarded as the creator of the modern field guide.

Born and raised in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in Berkshire County, Ralph Hoffmann graduated from Harvard and taught Latin at Brown and Nichols School in Cambridge while refining his already prodigious birding skills and gathering information on bird identification and behavior. During this period he also was a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club and was thus able to interact with the finest field ornithologists of his day. This, coupled with his keen hearing, observational abilities, attention to detail, and love for teaching, provided Hoffmann with all the requisites for being a first-rate author of natural history. He began work on *A Guide to the Birds of New England and Eastern New York* in the mid-1890s and completed it in 1904.

What sets *A Guide to the Birds* apart from earlier works are (1) Hoffmann's use of italics to call attention to critical identification points; (2) comparative statements regarding similar species; (3) generous use of black-and-white woodcuts showing diagnostic patterns of the upper body and tail; (4) accurate phonetic renditions of calls and songs; and (5) extended notes on behavior, nests, and other details. Not only does this demonstrate Hoffmann's deep knowledge of hundreds of species, but the emphasis on the "field-mark," on "the aspect of birds as seen out of doors," and on vocal clues means that Hoffmann fully realized that the days of shooting to confirm identification were coming to an end and that he was breaking new ground.

As an example of Hoffmann's abilities, consider the following from the Vesper Sparrow species account.

To distinguish between the Vesper Sparrow and the Song Sparrow, observe, if possible, the *white outer tail-feathers* of the former; these, however, are often not clearly visible, -- the bird must spread its tail fully to show them. One may also note the grayer shade of the Vesper Sparrow's brown, the *dusky cheek-patch*, and the absence at the sides of the throat of the reddish-brown marks, which on the Song Sparrow form a triangle with the dark breast-spot. The Vesper Sparrow is a less nervous bird than the Song Sparrow; it often runs or squats before one, either in the road . . . or in the grass; the Song Sparrow darts with a jerk of its tail into the nearest bushes.

Hoffmann expounds further on the song of the Vesper Sparrow, not only comparing it with other species but pointing out variations in the form of local dialects.

Certainly R. T. P. would approve! What Hoffmann has given us is the "Peterson method," but in a verbal form, lacking only the diagnostic arrows and full-color plates. True, Hoffmann required the observer to wade through lengthy keys to arrive at a species identification, but his keys, being arranged by color *and* by season as well as containing brief information on plumage, voice, and behavior, were designed to maximize efficiency and accuracy. In his superb *Birds of the Pacific States* (1927) -- yes, he had spanned the continent before Peterson's first eastern guide had appeared -- Hoffmann moved a step closer to the ideal guide by enlisting the help of Allan Brooks to portray in black and white each species in lifelike action poses, thus showing to advantage the various fieldmarks and characteristic postures. Although a few color plates are included, I find the line drawings to be superior to most field-guide plates of his era *and* of ours. Therefore, I believe that it was Ralph Hoffmann who brought us the first truly modern field guide.

Having devoted the above paragraphs to emphasizing the importance of Hoffmann's contribution to field ornithology in the hope that he won't slip back into relative obscurity, I wish to note another of Hoffmann's accomplishments in field science -- that is, in botany. In 1922 Hoffmann published his "Flora of Berkshire County, Massachusetts" (*Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History* 36 (5): 171-382). It was, and is, a fine example of sound herbarium research, perceptive field work, and erudite synthesis of data. Nearly sixteen hundred species and well-marked varieties were treated. Today, sixty-five years later, I find it an indispensable guide in my searches for the state's rare flora. And finally, while living in California, Hoffmann concentrated on the large and notoriously difficult genus *Eriogonum* (buckwheats -- you've seen one; you've seen them all). For Hoffmann, it must have been sheer pleasure. Imagine -- rather than a mere half dozen *Empidonax* to trifle with, he had over a hundred *Eriogonum* to romp through!

Readers wishing to know more about Ralph Hoffmann may read the article by Harold Swanton in the September 1981 issue of *Natural History* (90: 30).

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