

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1990 AFO/WOS SYMPOSIUM: THE AMATEUR IN ORNITHOLOGY

by Edward H. Burt, Jr.

Editor's Note. "The Amateur in Ornithology" was one of two major symposia at the Joint Meeting of the Association of Field Ornithologists (AFO) and the Wilson Ornithological Society (WOS), held from May 31 to June 2, 1990 at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. In this issue, Bird Observer is pleased to publish the four papers given for the symposium. Edward H. Burt, Jr., co-chair of the scientific program for the meeting and president of AFO, provides Bird Observer readers with an introduction to the series of papers. The meeting was attended by 187 registrants from thirty-one states, one Canadian province, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

I can hardly remember not watching birds, something that most ornithologists, professional or amateur, can perhaps say. Most professional ornithologists continue to watch birds for the sheer joy of seeing them, a joy they share with their amateur colleagues. Field trips are an integral part of both professional and amateur meetings and conversations between papers integrate science with enthusiasm for birds.

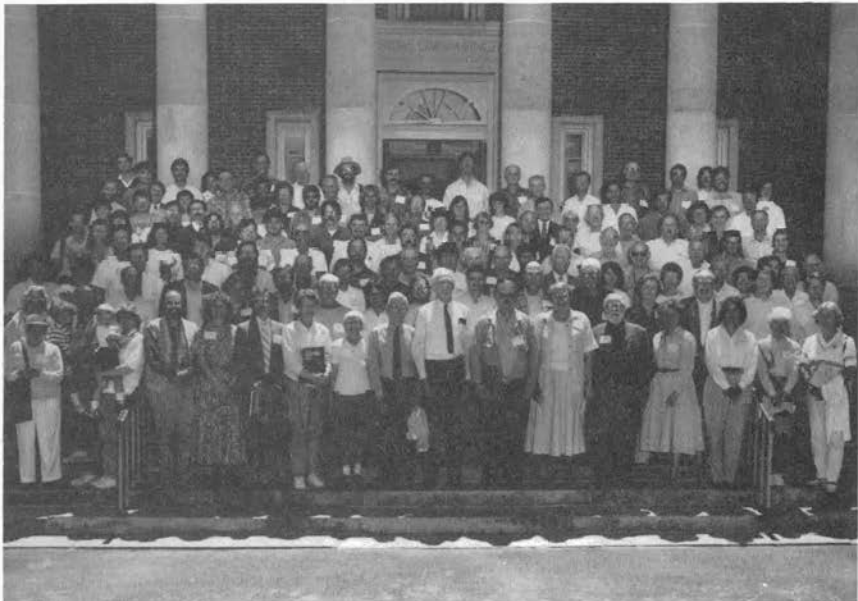
Amateur ornithologists feature prominently in ornithological history. The first ornithological textbook was written by Frederick II (1194-1250), Holy Roman emperor and king of Sicily. Gilbert White (1720-1793), a parish cleric in Selborne, England, was a keen observer of nature in general and birds in particular. His *Natural History of Selborne*, published in 1789, is still in print. The grace of White's language along with his remarkable insights into natural history make the book a delight to read. Charles Darwin (1809-1883) supported his theory of evolution with observations of Galapagos finches and domestic pigeons, but he never occupied a professional position in biology. Margaret Morse Nice (1883-1974) pioneered the use of color bands in her *Life History of the Song Sparrow* (1937), a work that established a new standard of excellence in the study of the life history of a single species. Harold Mayfield, a successful and innovative businessman, found time to become the foremost authority on Kirtland's Warbler, to develop the Mayfield method for assessing nesting success, and to serve as president of three major ornithological societies. The role of the amateur in ornithology is secure. A multitude of skilled amateurs participated in the state bird atlas projects. Thousands participate in Breeding Bird Surveys, Breeding Bird Censuses, and Winter Bird Population Studies, and tens of thousands participate in the annual Christmas Bird Counts. These distribution and population studies provide the data with which to assess the impact of global warming, ozone depletion, and habitat fragmentation. These vital data form the foundation on which to construct policies to help preserve

birds and their habitats for future generations.

Not all amateur contributions are based on finding and watching birds in the field. Banding stations, such as the Manomet Bird Observatory, depend on dedicated amateurs who donate many hours to banding and recording data from captured birds. In communities throughout North America, enthusiastic amateurs are a resource for local schools and for the neighborhood child fascinated by birds. The energy, skill, and enthusiasm that amateurs bring to ornithology are as vital to its health as the depth of knowledge and conceptual framework provided by professional ornithologists.

The papers and authors in this issue of *Bird Observer* affirm the shared enthusiasm and goals of amateur and professional ornithologists. It is a view of science that is particularly well expressed by Jacob Bronowski (J. Bronowski, 1977, *A Sense of the Future*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 4):

Let no one tell you again that science is only for specialists; it is not. It is no different from history or good talk or reading a novel; some people do it better and some worse; some make a life's work of it; but it is within the reach of everybody.



*AFO/WOS 1990 Meeting Participants
Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts*