

**BOOK REVIEW: *Dean of Birdwatchers:
A Biography of Ludlow Griscom***

by Richard K. Walton

Dean of Birdwatchers: A Biography of Ludlow Griscom by William E. Davis, Jr. 1994. Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington and London. \$29.95 (cloth).

In baseball there's the Babe, among philosophers Kant, in software Bill Gates, and in the world of birding Ludlow Griscom. Ludlow who? It is a sad matter of fact that among the large and ever-growing group of birders in the late twentieth century there are many who are unacquainted with Ludlow Griscom.

Fortunately, there is now a remedy to this unhappy situation. Ted Davis' new biography lavishly details the life of Ludlow Griscom, a man who profoundly influenced the sport of birding. While it may be hyperbole to say that Ludlow Griscom (or anyone else) *invented* birding, he as much as anyone influenced how we play the game. From the binoculars slung around our necks to the field guides stuffed under the seat, from daily lists to "Big Days," and from Christmas Bird Counts to life lists—in each of these aspects of modern-day birding we find the hand of Ludlow Griscom. Davis' account gives each of us an opportunity to rediscover our roots. In the life of Ludlow Griscom we find many, if not all, of the forces that define our pastime. But be forewarned, this Griscom is no Prince Charming.

Davis' book is divided into five parts: The Early Years, Ornithology, In the Field, Conservation, and the Final Years. The author draws on a wealth of letters, journals, and other published materials. More significantly, Davis' personal interviews with dozens of Griscom's colleagues, companions, and family members present his readers with a fascinating and instructive array of anecdotes, insights, and reminiscences. It is this collection of first-person accounts that are the strength of this work.

Ludlow Griscom seems to have spent most of his life in a vortex—not as a hapless victim of circumstances but rather as a prime mover of the maelstrom. At home Griscom rejects his parents' desires for a law career and passionately embraces his interest in birding and ornithology. In *amor*, Ludlow chooses a woman whose initial impressions of her suitor are of a man given to chauvinism and woman-hating. In the bosom of his family Griscom fosters intense competition with his children over the attentions of Edith Griscom. At the office he displays a knack for polarizing fellow staffers, usually into pro- and anti-Griscom camps. In the field Ludlow's "in your face" brand of quick-draw, self-assured identification does little to attract admirers. One of his contemporaries described Griscom as "the only man he had ever seen who could strut sitting down."

But there is another side to Ludlow Griscom. Picture the perfect host entertaining house guests with an after-dinner concert of Chopin and Liszt. Consider the ever enthusiastic mentor willing, indeed eager, to take time with a rank amateur. This too is Ludlow Griscom. Indeed, among a select group of followers, going afield with Ludlow was very special. One devotee, Juliet Richardson, put it this way: ". . . if you were included in the charmed circle—I can't tell you what it meant, my life was transformed—I didn't care how early I got up in the morning, and I'd often wait if I was invited to something else to see if I was going to be invited on a field trip . . ." Never mind that Griscom might send you off to flush birds out of the poison ivy or invariably need another hand to extricate his vehicle from the sand. For the chosen few Griscom *was* god-like, and even now those golden days in the field with Ludlow are cherished memories. One can even find a touch of droll humor about Griscom as he describes eating giant-swift (not crow!) pie in the mountains of Panama and retrieving herons in the mangrove swamps of Belize.

Griscom's considerable organizational efforts are also covered in detail by Davis. While his work as a professional ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Comparative Zoology is of some interest, Griscom's contributions to conservation and education are perhaps more notable. In particular, Griscom's important role in the creation of the Boston Museum of Science will be a revelation to most. I assume that those with an interest in professional ornithology will mine these sections of the book, while those interested in organizational history will dwell on Davis' treatment of Griscom and the National Audubon Society, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and the American Ornithologists' Union.

All in all, the general reader may, like the reviewer, be more inclined to linger over the personal portrait of Ludlow Griscom and his passion for birds in the field. This is the man who personified the shift away from shot-gun ornithology to the present wave of avocational birding. Davis' book gives each of us the opportunity to experience these beginnings—in the company of one of birding's most controversial characters.

I never met Ludlow Griscom. Over the last two decades, however, I have heard numerous "Griscom stories" and gradually developed a nagging question about just what kind of man he really was. As I turned the last page in Ted Davis' biography, I had made up my mind. *Dean of Birdwatchers: A Biography of Ludlow Griscom* will give you the opportunity to do the same.

RICHARD K. WALTON has coauthored with Robert W. Lawson several *Birding By Ear* guides: *Birding By Ear: Eastern* (1989); *Birding By Ear: Western* (1990); and *More Birding By Ear: Eastern and Central* (1994). Dick is also the author of *Birds of the Sudbury River Valley* (1984), published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

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