

ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

(Bird Observer continues its series celebrating the books that have inspired, delighted, or enlightened our book reviewers.)

E.H. Forbush and Other Treasures

Dorothy R. Arvidson

"Reverend J.H. Linsley. Opened the stomach of a gannet, found bird. Opened stomach of *that* bird, found another bird. Bird within bird within bird."

"Mrs. Gene Stratton Porter. Examined food remains in nest of kingfisher, found one-tenth of them to be nearly equally divided between berry seeds and the hard parts of grasshoppers. Exacting work but easier than writing."

"Owner of a bar in Fairhaven (no name given). Had pair of Carolina Wrens build nest in basket containing sticks of dynamite. No untoward results."

"Mr. William Brewster, of Concord. Was standing by corner of one of his barns. Phoebe pursued by sharp-shinned hawk used Brewster's body as shield in eluding hawk."

"Mr. Stanley C. Jewett. Asserts that wounded red-breasted merganser at Netarts Bay, Oregon, dived to submerged root in three feet of water and died while clinging there. Apparent suicide. May 1915."

"Mr. T. Gilbert Pearson. Lady of his acquaintance, while sitting alone in her room, was startled when beef bone fell out onto hearth. Went outside, discovered turkey buzzard peering down chimney. Carelessness on part of bird."

E.B. White, "Mr. Forbush's Friends,"
The New Yorker, February 26, 1966

A generation ago, the essay, "Mr. Forbush's Friends," from which the above quotes were taken, appeared in my favorite magazine. It caught my eye at once. E.B. White was and still is the writer I most admire. And the name Forbush rang a bell. Elwyn Brooks White, generally regarded by editors, writers, and literary critics as the finest essayist of the twentieth century, explains early in his Forbush piece: "Although not a student of birds, I am thrown with them a good bit...When I encounter a new face or renew my acquaintance with an old one, I turn to Forbush for help in comprehending what I have been looking at."

Mr. White is best known for his delightful children's books (*Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*) but noted as well for his long association with *The New Yorker*, where he perfected while editor of the magazine's much admired "news breaks" (the amusing fillers used to justify the length of the columns) a droll, spare style of writing. The E.B. White style is evident in the opening quotations, where he is paraphrasing anecdotes related by Massachusetts ornithologist Edward Howe Forbush (1858-1929) in his much revered

work, *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* (published by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1925-29). However, before I turn to Mr. Forbush, a few more words about E.B. White. In 1970, *The Trumpet of the Swan* was published. Presumably for children, it is as well a great book for birdwatchers — young or old, with or without children to read to. In 1988, Mr. White was persuaded to read it for a CD recording, and that disc is a treasure in my library.

By 1966 when E.B. White's witty essay sent me straight to the library to have a look at Forbush's book, this three-volume work had been long regarded as a literary classic. At the library I found only Volumes I and II, but my first perusal told me I must possess these hard-to-find, out-of-print books. And I was lucky: Early on, I picked up for 25 cents at a Florida library sale a falling-apart copy of Volume III, published in 1929. Opening this volume for the first time, I was greeted on the frontispiece by a twinkling-eyed, handsome, and friendly face — Forbush looking me straight in the eye. I was enchanted by the photo. The ensuing preface by editor John Richard May proved fascinating. Shortly after Forbush's death at 71 on March 7, 1929, May, a friend who had worked beside Forbush as editor for many years and knew him well, provided a moving 32-page account of the famous birdman's life and character to be included in Volume III. Skillfully inserting lengthy excerpts from the author's own writings, May created a portrait so vibrant that Forbush seems still alive. Thanks to Editor May and a grieving staff of co-workers in the state Department of Agriculture, the final volume was in print within the year of Forbush's death.

For a decade, I possessed only Volume III. Finally, a friend, naturalist Brian Cassie, a knowledgeable, first-rank bibliophile then in the book business, found for me an affordable secondhand set — volumes that have been within easy reach of my desk ever since — to browse for pleasure, to examine again the beautiful color plates of the reknowned Louis Agassiz Fuertes, or to seek information about ornithology and birdwatching in the early part of the twentieth century.

On July 9, 1880, the *Worcester Spy* published the first of a series of articles by 22-year-old Forbush, "Our Birds in July." Thus began the writing career that culminated in the now treasured *Birds of Massachusetts*. Much honored by scientists in his lifetime (1858-1929) for his accomplishments in ornithology and wildlife conservation, Forbush also, according to May, "held a most unusual place in the hearts of hundreds of persons who had never met him face to face but who knew him through the revelation of his writings. His sincerity and singleness of purpose, his patience and tactful consideration, his friendly interest in the problems of the veriest tyro in bird study, gave a personal touch to all his relations with others." (Vol. III, p. xlvi). Not bad for a boy who at fifteen quit school, determined to earn his living, be independent, and educate himself "by experience, observation and reading" because he believed that "the use of the hands and the study of the living world should at least accompany that of the text book and the dead world." For the next seven years young Forbush worked as "a farmer, laborer and mechanic — my avocation the study of nature. Thus I grew up...preparing myself for the work that I seemed best fitted to do." (Vol. III, p. xxiv)

What endears these books to me are the anecdotes about birds and people found in the sections titled "Haunts and Habits" — a wonderful compilation by a very gifted

writer of bird reports sent him by his friends, by fellow ornithologists, and by ordinary birdwatching people who only knew him by reputation but felt connected to him. Whenever I open a Forbush volume, I am lost —always reluctant to put it down, swept along by these amusing, often bizarre encounters between man and bird. For my money, Forbush is as good a read as you'll find anywhere in ornithological literature.

The New Yorker led me to Mr. Forbush, just as, years earlier, the magazine had introduced me to Rachel Carson's writings, a determining influence in my life. In 1950, prior to the publication of Carson's *The Sea Around Us*, portions of the manuscript appeared as articles in *The New Yorker*. Twelve years later the magazine published *Silent Spring*, first as a series of articles and then as a book.


The Sea Around Us (1951) was on the best-seller lists for 86 weeks and later translated into 30 languages. Having read the selections in *The New Yorker*, I put the book on the required reading list for my Simmons College life science students. Within a year the author, dedicated biologist and skilled writer Rachel Carson, became world-famous. The success of this book enabled Carson to retire from her position as Editor-in-chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to devote herself to writing. The focus of her interest, however, remained the same — the relation of life to its environment. From 1958 on, she collected data from scientists all over the world, documenting the devastating effect on the earth's ecosystems caused by the widespread use of pesticides, herbicides, and other poisonous and carcinogenic chemicals. The result was *Silent Spring* (1962), a courageous and damning protest that applied an effective spur to the environmentalist movement. The title of this landmark book was prompted by the many letters and calls that Carson received from alarmed birdwatchers and field biologists who sought an explanation for the absence of birdsong and the decline in numbers of birds in former avian-rich sanctuaries. Carson became an icon for many biologists, myself included. Her books aroused me to become a conservation activist and a volunteer worker for environmental protection organizations. My casual birdwatching evolved into a serious study of ornithology and a passionate concern for the environment and the birds I love to watch.

Limitations of space permit only brief mention of other books that I treasure or which have been much used and appreciated by me in my work, most of which I have reviewed over the years in *Bird Observer* or elsewhere. Foremost among them is *The Life of Birds* (1963) by Professor Joel Carl Welty, who was an important friend to me in my college years, a mentor during graduate school, and a role model in my teaching career. I began birdwatching at age three with my grandmother's purple martin house and was taught by my hunter father to recognize most of the birds in my area of Wisconsin and Illinois by age ten without benefit of field guide or field glasses. However, Carl Welty and Dr. Tage Johansson, then a student of Welty's at Beloit College, were the first people to acquaint me with the science of ornithology. Welty frequently referred to a "popular" bird book he was writing when I first knew him, 25 years before it was published. The preface in *The Life of Birds* states that "the book is directed toward the general student," its aim being "to present, simply and straightforwardly, the basic facts of bird biology...to arouse in the reader a lasting enthusiasm for birds and for the wonderful things they do." Joel Carl Welty, like Edward Forbush, loved birds. He was revising the fourth edition of

his book when he died, and Dr. Luis Baptista of the California Academy of Sciences, whom Welty had asked to help him, saw it through to publication in 1988. The book is a famous textbook, still widely used in university ornithology courses, a very good read, and certainly the best reference text on ornithology ever published to date.

Another reference book that I value and recommend highly is *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres (1980). It bore a price tag initially of \$65, out of reach for most birders I knew. Fortunately for me, a copy to review was sent me by the publisher. This book is a gold mine of facts and has become for me indispensable, invariably providing the information I seek, though its roundabout cross-referencing sometimes drives me mad. Although the book is an overweight 7-lb.-2-oz. tome, clumsy in the hand, heavy on the lap, it does have beautiful photographs, a useful bibliography of periodical literature, and requires less shelf space than the 26 volumes of Arthur Bent which it has supplanted.

A different encyclopedia, one that I enjoy hugely whenever I open it, is Chris Leahy's *The Birdwatcher's Companion* (1982), a.k.a. the "poor man's Terres," a book that the author claims (p. ix) will tell you, "for example: whether birds have a well-developed sense of taste; what 'agonistic' means; ...how to pronounce 'parula'; who Bendire was; how many species of woodpeckers there are in the world; what kind of bird a 'hagdon' is; what special birds [you] might hope to see in the Pribilof Islands; ...when to visit the Florida Keys in order to be sure of finding a Black-whiskered Vireo...." In my *Bird Observer* review (October 1983) I lauded the author for providing "a wealth of fascinating information in lively prose that is erudite, literate, witty, and, for this reviewer, readable to the point of addiction." Seventeen years later, my opinion has changed not one iota.

Among field guides, I have grown fond of Richard H. Pough's three *Audubon Bird Guides* with color plates by Don Eckelberry. The text is well written and gives more information than most guides about habits and behavior, and the color plates are very beautiful. Another guide I like is the first edition (and only the first) of the Golden Press' *Birds of North America* by Robbins, Brunn, and Zim with illustrations by Arthur Singer. It was recommended to me by my tour guide on my first trips to Mexico in 1967-68, a college kid named Peter Alden. On one trip I recall this young fellow pointing out birds from the bus, clutching in his waving hand long strips of paper that threatened to fly out the open window — the printer's proofs for his first book. *Finding the Birds in Western Mexico* was published in 1969 with color plates by John O'Neill and was followed by *Finding Birds Around the World* (1981), both splendid books that I have long prized. Peter has since become a world-famous tour leader, and has probably found, identified, and shown more birds to more people than anyone else anywhere. He is also the author/editor of a series of comprehensive wildlife guides, the *National Audubon Society* field guides to Africa and to regions of the United States (Knopf, 1995-98). 

Dorothy R. Arvidson is a retired college professor and editor emerita of this journal. She currently works as a freelance editor, writer, and ornithological consultant. She has often wished she could write like E.B. White, could have birded with Mr. Forbush, and worked with Rachel Carson. But she is happy she began birdwatching a long time ago, when there were still lots of birds everywhere.