

An Educational Tribute to a Local Son — A. C. Bent

David M. Larson

On the grounds of the Bristol County Agricultural High School in Dighton, Massachusetts, there is a nondescript wood frame building with a very large wooden door at one end, suggesting a barn. The two handicap ramps might suggest otherwise. Open the front door, and the interior of the building is anything but nondescript. This nineteenth century barn is, in fact, the Bristol County Natural History Center (BCNHC), and it has a peculiar and significant place in ornithological history.



All photographs by the author

Much of the display space on the ground floor of the BCNHC is given over to dioramas with bird and mammal mounts, and many of the bird specimens were provided from the collection of Arthur Cleveland Bent, a name of considerable luster in North American ornithology.

Arthur Cleveland Bent (1866-1954) was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, and lived there all of his life. He attended Harvard College and, while involved with natural history and birds from an early age, spent a first career working in the cotton mill business and in public utilities. Later in life he became more active in ornithology. According to W. Taber (1955. In Memorium: Arthur Cleveland Bent. *The Auk* 72: 332-339), Bent wrote:

“In considering the amount of ornithological work I have done, allowance must be made for the fact that I was deeply engaged in various business enterprises until I was 48 years old, and only partially retired then. I did not wholly retire from business until I was over 60. Most of my ornithological exploration was done between the ages of 35 and 60. I have not travelled far from home since I was 65.”

In 1910 Bent started work on his most lasting ornithological contribution, the monumental book series, *Life Histories of North American Birds*. This Smithsonian Institution series was actually begun by C. E. Bendire, who compiled volumes 1 and 2 (published 1892 and 1895). Work on the series was to carry Bent through the rest of his life, put him in contact with many of the luminaries of North American ornithology, and bring him abundant recognition from his peers. He was president of the American Ornithologists' Union (1935-1937), and a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, the Wilson Ornithological Club, the Cooper Ornithological Club, and many other organizations. He was honored with the William Brewster Award from the AOU and the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal from the National Academy of Science.

Each of the *Life Histories* follows the same format: descriptions of plumage, behavior, voice, food, range, eggs, nest, young, and migration. Photographs accompany many of the accounts. Part of the charm of these histories lies in the inclusion of anecdotes and observations from many correspondents throughout North America.



During his many years of active ornithological study and travels throughout North America, Bent amassed large collections of bird skins (now at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard), eggs (30,000, now at the Smithsonian), and mounts. Some of Bent's mounted birds are displayed at the BCNHC.



How did a high school become the beneficiary of this collection? Apparently, the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard was not interested in the mounts, so Bent donated the material to the school. After an unfortunate fire that destroyed part of the collection, the school formed the BCNHC, and renovations and proper care ensued. Under the tutelage of William Lapoint (Curator of the BCNHC, Head of the Landscape Department, and a Teacher of Natural Resources) and Brian Bastarache (Assistant Curator of the BCNHC and a Teacher of Natural Resources), students in the Natural Resources program at the Bristol County Agricultural High School have undertaken much of the restoration and curatorial work; these students work and study in the Natural History Center. The

current state of the collection, and of the BCNHC, is a tribute to all involved.

In a paean to Bent, one room houses a recreation of part of his library, with a desk, cabinets of mounted birds, and his typewriter, on which he typed over five million words while writing the *Life Histories*.

As noted, the ground floor is given over largely to mounted specimens. The basement consists of various aquaria (with fresh and salt water exhibits) and displays containing mounts of fish and other aquatic species. In addition, there



is a display of a coastal shack/decoy carver's workshop, and a small lecture space. An extensive egg collection from Walter B. Savary of Wareham is also housed on campus, although it is currently inaccessible to the public since eggs fade with exposure to light.

The BCNHC has a part time Naturalist/Interpreter, Nancy Durfee, who staffs the center and runs educational programs. Currently, the center is open to the public on Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. or by appointment; call 508-669-6744. There is no admission fee. Remember that this museum is on the grounds of a high school and smoking and alcohol are prohibited on the property.



When you visit, be sure to bird the area. The Taunton River (still tidal at this point) abuts the campus of the Bristol County Agricultural High School and in the winter often supports a good variety of ducks. Bald Eagles can be found there, along with various wintering passerines. Please note that you must make prior arrangements to bird the school grounds (call Nancy Durfee at the BCNHC, Monday through Wednesday, 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.). According to the count compiler, Russ Titus, the Taunton/Middleboro Christmas Bird Count has tallied "White-eyed Vireo, Greater White-fronted Goose, Lark Sparrow, Snow Goose, Marsh Wren, all three accipters on one CBC morning, Wood Duck, Common Snipe, Greater Yellowlegs, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Snow Bunting on the high school campus. At dusk Rusty Blackbirds usually come in by the bridge. The field edges are good for Savannah Sparrow in winter." While the author has little information on bird populations in this area in other seasons (although Bent probably would have known), the habitat is intriguing and a little more coverage could turn up some surprises. 🦋

David M. Larson is the Production Editor of Bird Observer, the Wired Birder (which will return in the next issue), and a frustrated bird counter whose Taunton/Middleboro CBC area is across the Taunton River from the Bristol County Agricultural High School.

As the Wired Birder, he would like to point out that the text of A.C. Bent's Life Histories of North American Birds is available online at <<http://www.birdzilla.com/>>; follow the links to the Wild Bird Omnibus. The pages were processed using optical character recognition software but not copy-edited, so there are some unintelligible words.

