

Charles Johnson Maynard: The Enigmatic Naturalist

William E. Davis, Jr.

C. J. Maynard, the name he generally used in his voluminous publications, was born on May 6, 1845, on a farm in West Newton, Massachusetts, to Samuel and Emiline Maynard. His father's death when Charles was twelve precipitated a sequence of events that fostered the enigmatic aspects of his life and career. He was forced by circumstances to work on the farm and dropped out of the public school he attended by age sixteen. He was thus denied the education in science that would have facilitated his natural history interests, and he would spend his life trying to make ends meet. His blue-collar background separated him from the majority of those who pursued natural history as a vocation or serious avocation, and certainly was a factor in his rejection of the "establishment" professional outlets for mutual discussion and publication of natural history information. After an initial rejection by the members of the newly formed Nuttall Ornithological Club, Maynard made his own way in natural history through a long and amazingly productive career. He was viewed as a loner by the well-connected, but became a beloved teacher and guru to generations of young people who fell under his influence.



Charles J. Maynard May 11, 1918.
C. J. Maynard birding on the dunes,
May 11, 1918.

Natural history as a career

West Newton of 1845 was rural, and early on, encouraged by his mother, Maynard developed an interest in natural history (Townsend 1929). He collected specimens of things natural and stored them in the attic of the old farm house. After three years of working on the farm, he ventured out to earn a living, and followed his interests by setting up a taxidermy shop in 1866, a business that he continued at one level or another for the rest of his life. He was hired in 1866 to collect birds for E. A. Samuels, the Curator of the State Cabinet for the Commonwealth. J. A. Allen from the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard bought bird skins from him, as did William Brewster and many others whose passion for birds included amassing collections of bird skins.

One of his early jobs was to organize a large collection of mounted birds for the Boston Society of Natural History, a center for natural history devotees at the time, and during the year in which he was working on this project, he met many of the local

dignitaries, including T. M. Brewer. Maynard lived in Ipswich for three years, but returned to Newton in 1874 where he remained for the rest of his life. He took the first of his collecting trips to Florida and the Bahamas in 1868-1869 and his last to the Bahamas in 1924 (Townsend 1929). During the 1880s and 1890s he had a series of shops in downtown Boston where he dealt in natural history specimens. One of his advertisements states that he has the largest collections of corals, gorgonias, shells, echinoderms, general marine specimens, insects, minerals, and bird skins for sale in the United States. He also sold supplies for taxidermists, entomologists, oologists, botanists, and mineralogists. Although his taxidermy gradually became overshadowed by his natural history specimen sales, he continued to conduct taxidermy classes.

Collecting natural history objects was becoming an international pastime (Barrow 1999), and a growing market for bird skins, nests and eggs, and natural history items in general provided an outlet for a boy who was deficient in funds, education, and friends within the establishment.

A late nineteenth-century proliferation of magazines and journals dealing with aspects of natural history meshed well with Maynard's lifelong fascination with publishing books and articles. The sale of his books, along with teaching and bird walks in later years, provided sources of income. He charged \$.50 for individual nature walks, and \$2.00 for each volume of *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature*, forty bound lists of birds seen on the walks. He followed his predilections to print and publish his own books and articles, a habit that further estranged him from the establishment and further isolated him from peer review.

Maynard frequently encountered financial difficulties and apparently lived most of his life on the financial edge. This is illustrated by his letter to William Brewster, dated July 12, 1886:

My dear Mr Brewster

I want to make you an extraordinarily low offer in Bird skins as I greatly need money tomorrow. A customer who owes me a bill of \$70.00 has just written me that they cannot settle before the 29 of August & as I have a note of \$100.00 to meet on the 14/15 I am in a bad place, but I had rather sell my goods at a sacrifice than borrow as I might do of partners here in the city. Now if you accept my offer please do so, so that I can get the money tomorrow, the 14th, as I must have my resources by tomorrow night....I need all the ready money I can get to meet my bills & pull through.

His choice of profession, despite its financial limitations, allowed him the time and opportunity to indulge his passion, the observation and analysis of the natural world.

A brush with the "establishment"

Maynard met a number of the scientific luminaries of the day when he was in his early twenties as a result of his taxidermy work. It was natural that a young man who made his living largely by selling natural history objects would meet most of the kindred souls in the Boston area.

Hence, it was to be expected that when a group of young men began to meet informally in the early 1870s in Cambridge to discuss birds, and in 1873 formally established the Nuttall Ornithological Club, Maynard would sooner or later become involved. He was voted a Resident Member of the Club in January 1875, and Vice President of the Club in April 1876. He was older (at thirty) than most of the Club members and had already published a book and more than two dozen papers, articles, and notes. Hence, his lifelong love affair with publication was well under way.

At the time he joined the Club, the idea of publishing a scientific journal on birds was being actively debated by Club members, and Maynard became a strong advocate. His influence in the final decision to publish the *Bulletin* was described by J. F. Batchelder (1937): "Older than most of the members, persuasive and sanguine, he might readily have led their hesitating desire to a point where it was easier to go forward than not." He was elected coeditor with H. A. Purdie in 1876, and was influential, probably because of his contacts and experience in the publication world, in producing the first issue of the *Bulletin* of the Club. This was a landmark because the *Bulletin* was the first journal in North America dedicated entirely to ornithology, and eventually evolved into *The Auk*, the journal of the American Ornithologists' Union and the premier journal of North American ornithology.

This first number of the *Bulletin* was circulated on May 6, 1876, and included a paper by Maynard and a frontispiece featuring a painting of Brewster's Warbler, hand colored by Maynard or under his supervision. The second number was scheduled for release on July first, but Maynard left in May on a collecting trip to Florida from which he not return until July, a decision that left him vulnerable to criticism and that precipitated substantial changes in the Club's editorial policy. During Maynard's absence, J. A. Allen, Curator of Ornithology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, and destined to be one of the most prominent ornithologists and mammalogists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, took over control of the *Bulletin*. Allen was seven years older than Maynard, one of the few professional ornithologists of the time, and a competent, powerful, and persuasive individual. At regular May meetings (Nuttall meetings were weekly at this time), Allen was first voted an associate editor and, on his motion, an editorial board was created. On another of Allen's motions two prominent national ornithologists, Elliott Coues and Geo. N. Lawrence were voted as associate editors. At a special meeting that followed, Allen was made Editor-in-Chief. In August, 1876, Maynard, obviously embittered by his removal, resigned from Nuttall. His brush with the establishment had been an unfortunate one.

Batchelder, in his *Nuttall Ornithological Club 1873-1919*, treats Maynard harshly, and probably unfairly. He refers to Maynard's later claim to having been the "originator and editor of the Nuttall Bulletin" as "...hollowness of Maynard's misleading statement." Batchelder refers to Maynard's leaving on his collecting trip in May as "...Maynard's faithlessness to his undertaking..." and later "...recognizing that Maynard could not be depended on..." This harsh assessment seems to be unjustified. It is interesting to note that Batchelder did not become a member of the Club until a 1877, and hence did not directly witness the events he describes. Batchelder, who had

independent means, apparently ignored the fact that Maynard was not similarly positioned and had to earn a living — which he did by collecting. It is probable that Maynard would have been financially hard pressed to abandon his collecting plans for June and July. Although his absence made him vulnerable and exacerbated a potentially bad situation for him, it seems probable that if he had remained the course of events would not have been significantly different. J. A. Allen was a powerful man with a national perspective and vision for the *Bulletin*, and undoubtedly had the support and confidence of William Brewster, President and leader of the Club. Purdie, coeditor with Maynard, was also superseded by Allen, but remained with the Club. Maynard's less distinguished education and family background in all likelihood worked against him, particularly with the class-conscious Batchelder, and it is possible that he simply felt out of place. It is interesting to note that Batchelder's most noteworthy publication, aside from his history of the Nuttall Club, was his bibliography (1951) of Maynard's published works — perhaps a twinge of guilt was involved in Batchelder's decision to undertake this project.

Problems with other scientists

Maynard's solitary ways and unorthodox approach to science and the publication thereof estranged him from the scientific community and, without doubt, diminished the value of his scientific contributions. He developed the bad habit of publishing his observations and theories without subjecting them to peer review, the normal procedure in science. He sometimes published his descriptions of new species or subspecies in non-mainstream and suspect journals. For example, he published the descriptions of five new species of birds in *The American Exchange and Mart and Household Journal* (1886), which was little more than a newspaper. Peer review standards were far different in the 1800s than they are today, and there were few exclusively scientific journals, but most published papers were reviewed by colleagues prior to publication. This is summed up, probably with justification, by Batchelder (1951):

This somewhat solitary habit no doubt deprived him of much wholesome criticism of his work, which, had he had it, might have given him much higher standards....His independence of mind and disregard, perhaps to some degree unconsciousness, of other scientific writers' accepted standards and habitual ways in matters of writing and publishing are more than conspicuous in his own writings.

Maynard, from 1893 on, conducted bird walks, and from 1908-1920 published the lists of sightings as volumes of *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature*, often crediting the individual who first spotted a particular bird. The "shotgun school" of ornithology still prevailed, and sight records were not accorded the value that they are today. Hence, once again Maynard ignored the ornithological practices of the day.

The naturalist and his publications

Despite the criticisms of his practice of science, Maynard was an inspired naturalist whose contributions covered a broad spectrum of taxonomic groups.

Included in his accomplishments are the discovery and first published description of the Ipswich Sparrow, of which he was particularly proud. Howard Rich, who went on nature walks with Maynard and visited his home, is quoted as saying (Snider 1976) about the reduction, many years after Maynard's death, of the Ipswich Sparrow to a subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow: "That would have broken his heart."

He had personality characteristics that contributed to his worth as a naturalist. He had an open mind. This is exemplified by a May 15, 1889, letter to William Brewster in which he reversed a preconceived notion when observations suggested that he had been wrong:

My dear Mr. Brewster:

I shall be pleased to see you at any time, and I am usually at home. I shall be here all this week and all next, excepting next Monday when I go to Wayland to look for a female Bittern. I was up day before yesterday and got a male within a hundred yards of where Bradford Torry heard his pumping. My bird was also pumping, although I did not see him. I was so perfectly skeptical as to Torry's theory [sic] in regard to the sound being produced in any other way than by the lower larynx that had he stated that the bird went out in the marshes and cut a reed and played on it, I should have believed it as quickly.

Judge my surprise when after six hours work, during which I never left my seat, I arose, not only thoroughly convinced that Mr. Torry was right in his conjecture, but also that his simile of a pump is most appropriate; the Bittern being provided with a pump having two boxes. What is more singular is that all the vocal apparatus, or rather the portion that makes it vocal, is assumed for the breeding season only. The story is such a long one that I will not enlarge on it as I shall publish the results of my investigations in the July [sic] Contributions. I consider this one of the very most important of my discoveries in the anatomy of the vocal organs in Birds, as well as the most startling.

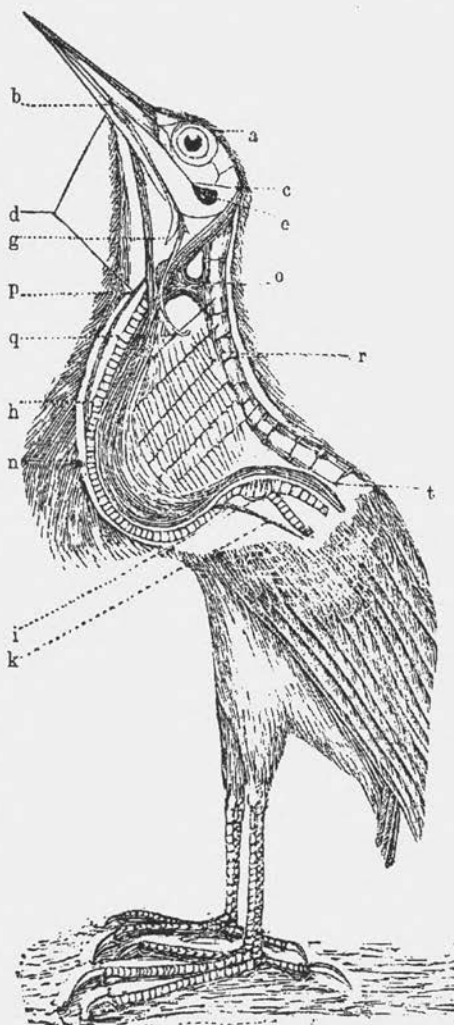
Despite his proclivity to solitary behavior, Maynard kept up good relationships with local ornithologists, including William Brewster, President of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. This may in some part have been due to economic considerations, since Brewster and other collectors of bird skins were important to his business interests, but his letters indicate a genuine desire to share information and be personally helpful. An example of this charitable character is seen in a June 10, 1907, letter to Brewster:

My dear Mr. Brewster:

Has anyone told you of the *H. leucobronchialis* [Brewster's Warbler, a species named by William Brewster but later recognized as a hybrid Golden-winged/Blue-winged warbler] in the Arnold Arboretum? There is a pair there, and I found the nest on Saturday....I will gladly go out there with you if you cannot find a guide...

EXPLANATION.

- a, eye.
 b, first valvular, or mandibular, vocal muscle.
 c, occipital vocal muscle.
 d, space occupied by first bubble of air ejected.
 e, ear.
 g, tongue.
 p, maxillary vocal muscle.
 o, thoracic vocal muscle.
 q, muscle of tongue.
 r, vertebrae and six tendons supporting the oesophagal vocal muscle.
 h, retractor muscle to upper larynx.
 t, scapular attachment of the oesophagal muscle.
 n, trachea.
 i, inferior larynx.
 k, sterno tracheal muscle.

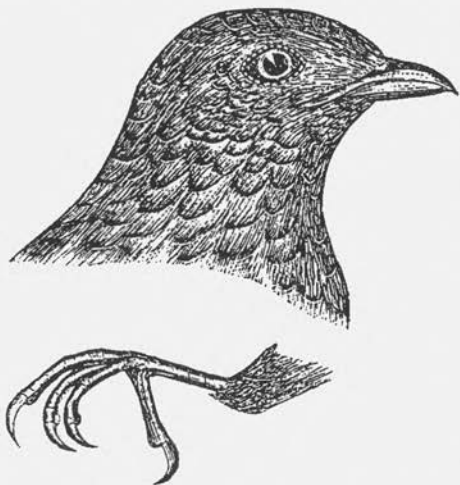


Ideal section of Bittern, showing vocal apparatus. Page 61 in C. J. Maynard's "Vocal Organs of Talking Birds."

Maynard published prolifically throughout his adult life. Batchelder's bibliography of Maynard's publications (1951) includes 271 entries, although the actual number of individual publications is difficult to determine, since Maynard published many editions of some books, and some of Batchelder's entries include a series of short publications. Nonetheless, Maynard's publications are prodigious, and they cover a wide range of topics. Although most concern birds, there are papers on reptiles (snakes, turtles), amphibians, mammals, fish, invertebrates (butterflies, molluscs, ants), echinoderms, sponges, pecan trees, and other topics such as Native

Americans, inscriptions on grave stones, and the weather. He also published on a number of topics including a theory of migration, evolution of species, and folklore. Many of his publications in later life reflected his increasing interest in teaching and education.

His publications ranged in length from a paragraph to more than 500 pages, and several publications, such as *Nature Study in Schools*, *Contributions to Science*, and *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature* (1908-1920), are probably best described as periodicals. Others, including *The Naturalist's Guide*, *The Birds of Florida*, *Birds of Eastern North America*, *Manual of Taxidermy*, *Butterflies of New England*, *Sparrows and Finches of New England*, *Warblers of New England*, and *Vocal Organs of Talking Birds* are all books, although some were published in parts.



Head and foot of an adult Purple Martin.
Page 110 in "Swallows of Eastern North America" *Nature Study in Schools* June-July 1899.

Except for *The Naturalist's Guide* (1870), Maynard usually printed and published his own books. He set his own type, printed on his own press, made the woodcuts for the illustrations, and even made the tools he used in making the woodcuts. Some publications were "illustrated with hand-colored plates, drawn on stone by the author." He either hand-colored the plates himself or oversaw the coloring. Maynard was a

keen observer, and his illustrations are accurate and often aesthetically pleasing.

Barred from a traditional career in science by educational constraints and upbringing, and perhaps personal preference, Maynard nonetheless became a naturalist and scientist through persistence and desire. Even his most vocal detractor, C. F. Batchelder, admitted his worth:

In various details Maynard's writings are only too easily open to criticism. But the more intimate one becomes with them, and the more one takes into consideration the difficulties under which he labored, the more there appear streaks of genius that are utterly lacking in the work of much better known naturalists.

Another prominent ornithologist, Charles W. Townsend, wrote (1929) that Maynard had a "sunny and cheerful disposition" and was a keen and accurate observer. While regretting that Maynard had not had a better education in science, he suggested the possibility that, "this would have spoiled his independence and originality."

Conservation

Much of Maynard's science has not stood the test of time, and most of his so-called "new species" have disappeared into synonymy with other species. He made his mark, however, in many ways, and prominent among these is his contribution to the conservation movement. While controversy and turmoil swirled around the effects of market hunting and the plume trade, Maynard was addressing fundamental issues in conservation, and, as usual, publishing his thoughts and observations. Excerpts from a 1907 article recounting the habitat changes that had occurred in his neighborhood in Newton exemplify his perspective:

I will take as an example the environment of my own home as a type of many places in our town....The meadow is drained, and the waving sedges have gone. The beautiful brook has been straightened into a ditch, and most of the willows have been cut down. The cedar hill is now an unsightly gravel pit. The golfer rolls his ball where once the meadow lark and bobolink sang. The old orchard has nearly gone, and few or no migrating warblers visit the few trees that remain; in short, the place has been made a desert for the birds...

Maynard then continues with recommendations that have a decidedly modern ring to them:

plant *native* shrubbery...Do not remove undergrowth from woodlands...do not allow fire to consume fallen leaves...Public parks should have whole sections left perfectly wild for the birds...Trees in such parks should not be sprayed (poisons so used are an injury to the birds)...The time has come for us to make an effort to keep what birds remain; let us make that effort earnestly.

By the turn of the century Maynard had become an influential teacher, and would touch the lives of several generations, instilling an appreciation for the natural world and the importance of its conservation.

The Teacher

Maynard claimed to have begun teaching in 1868, and therefore, at his death in 1929, he had been teaching for sixty-one years. His original classes in taxidermy were superseded by more general natural history. In 1893 he helped introduce nature education into the local school system. His publications reflect these interests, e.g., *Appendix to the text of Maynard's School Zoological Collection* (1893), *Nature Study in Schools* (1899-1900), and *Systematic Zoology for Teachers* (1899-1900). From 1910-1919 (Snider 1976) he taught summer school at the Massachusetts Agricultural College and published the syllabi as *Methods in the Study of Birds and their Economic Value* (1913) and *Methods in Bird Study* (1914, 1915). He began the bird walks that led to the publication of *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature* in 1908. He was apparently a charismatic teacher, filled with knowledge and enthusiasm that drew teachers as well as young folks with an inclination for natural history.

His greatest impact in natural history, and particularly in birds, was probably his influence on several generations of students in whom he instilled an appreciation of

nature and a conservation ethic. A fitting tribute to this aspect of this enigmatic naturalist's character is found in the following excerpt from the 1928 journal of David Lloyd Garrison:

Dec. 20. There came from home today Mr. Maynard's latest book, "Vocal Organs of Talking Birds." Mother got it on his advertisement and sent it to me.

It was a funny, chunky little book bound in grey and printed in an old style of type. Its contents were mostly incomprehensible (technical), but undoubtedly scholarly.

I sat on my trunk and read from it. Pictures came up in my mind. The stooped, unkempt, but still bright-eyed old sage shaking a little, working away by an oil lamp in his dusty garret; around him cats running over table tops and among specimens.

I thought of how much he had meant in my life. For a time he was one of the most important forces in forming me. Through the freshness and wonder of early Spring mornings he would take us across country, through forests and meadows; by his knowledge and insight giving into our eternal possession the birds and other wild things of nature which we met. To Dick Bolster and me he was more than a teacher and friend: a holy man....

This final book of his, strange, chunky, signed with his name, is indeed the work of his own hands. He composed it through years of minute study, in the field where he first found eminence and where he is still an unparalleled authority. He printed it himself, on his own small ancient hand press (a man over 80). The plates in it were from woodcuts he had made himself, and the four color plates he did in water-colors with his own shaking but tireless hand. This is the book that Mother bought for six dollars. I am glad she did, for the book is precious to me, and the six dollars may serve for a week perhaps to keep the wolf from the door for the nearly starving old man and his faithful wife and daughter Pearl.

This book is his last shot and stand for independence. I think his friends are rallying 'round to give him support. Though age and changing times and penury gather to oppress him, his spirit is undimmed and his courage unshaken.

Few people are accorded such obvious respect and devotion. 

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William E. Davis, Jr., is a member of the Bird Observer editorial board and a professor at Boston University. He wishes to thank Susan Abele for the information she provided for this article.

Editor's note: An exhibit, "Records of Walks and Talks with Nature: Charles Johnson Maynard, Newton's Naturalist," at the Jackson Homestead in Newton is open to the public April 2002-March 2003. Highlights include several editions of Maynard's *Birds of Eastern North America*, *Butterflies of New England*, and *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature* on loan from the Newton Free Library. Original Maynard bird specimens from several area museums are also on display. In addition, a series of original Audubon prints from the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Mildred Morse Center for Visual Arts will be shown during the exhibit, along with several volumes of *American Ornithology* by Alexander Wilson.

The Jackson Homestead is located at 527 Washington Street, Newton, between Newtonville and Newton Corner, less than 1/2 mile from Exit 17 on the Mass. Turnpike. Parking is available on site and on the street. Museum visiting hours: Tuesday through Saturday 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays 2-5 p.m. For information call 617-552-7238 or visit <<http://www.ci.newton.ma.us/Jackson/default.htm>>.

The Jackson Homestead

Newton's Museum & Historical Society

Walks and Talks with Nature
Charles Maynard, Newton's Naturalist

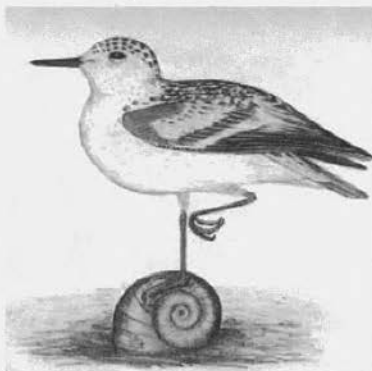


Exhibit Opens April 20, 2002