

THE CANARY ISLANDS ORNITHOLOGICAL EXPEDITION

By Dr. Carnes Weeks

In 1949 I developed a rather rare and little-known parasitic disease, probably caught from one of my Labrador Retrievers - Toxoplasmosis. As it was soon obvious that I would not be able to continue with my career as a surgeon, I determined to devote my life to ornithology.

In 1952 I took the Weeks African Expedition to French Equatorial Africa under the co-sponsorship of the American Museum of Natural History and the National Geographic Society. It was of interest to note that this was the first time that these two organizations had ever sponsored one expedition.

Early in my surgical practice I acquired a patient and life-time friend, Dr. James P. Chapin. What little I have accomplished in the field of ornithology is all certainly due to this splendid individual.

The next thing that engaged my attention was Meleagris gallinopus. I studied the Wild Turkey in South Carolina for six years.

As it became evident that I must live in a warm climate I began to look around for such a place where there had been very little if any serious ornithological work done, particularly in modern times. I first settled on Cuba and was well along in the organization of an ornithological expedition when the political situation deteriorated so rapidly the plan had to be abandoned. I next started reading all I could find about the Canary Islands. To my amazement, very little serious scientific work had been done on the avifauna of the Canaries since Bannerman's work, his last was published in 1922. In 1947 Helge Volsoe, Professor of Zoology at the University of Copenhagen, visited the Canary Islands and in the ensuing years wrote a modern monograph on the subject, but he had only been able to spend four months in the islands. Aside from these two authors there were short visits made by several English ornithologists, a French ornithologist, and another Dane.



It seemed to be an ideal place for a long-range study because there were so very many unanswered questions. Volsoe in his work leaves a question mark after every one of the 60 species of birds thought to breed in the Canaries. The same is true of the roughly 160 species of visitors. Professor Volsoe said to me in a letter dated November 13, 1959, "I firmly believe that a thorough study of the avifauna would be most valuable and sure to give important scientific results. Like other island fauna, the Canarian is strongly threatened and any delay could easily be irreparable." He continues, "A bird observatory on one of the eastern islands with possibilities for trapping and ringing birds would certainly yield an amount of valuable information of interest not only to the students of Canarian ornithology, but also to the more general problem of migration... also the problem of inter-island is of great theoretical interest and it could only be solved by a large scale ringing scheme such as I understand you plan to make."

In the year 1951 while planning the expedition to Africa, I made another very close friend, Professor Peter Paul Kellogg of the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University. He advised me and introduced me to the mysteries of sound-recording of birds. In reading an article by two British ornithologists, David Lack and H. N. Southern of Oxford University, they named 16 species of birds common to Great Britain and the Canary Islands whose songs or call notes show marked differences on the islands of Tenerife and other islands of this archipelago.

My objectives were then as follows:

1. The trapping and banding of all Canary Island birds through the cooperation of the Sociedad Española de Ornitología, Sección de Migración. This operation has never been attempted before.
2. The sound recording of songs and call notes of some 60 species of birds that are thought to nest on the islands of this archipelago. This has never been done before.
3. Color photography of these birds with the production of Kodachrome slides to match the recordings for the Land Laboratory of Sound, Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University.

The exploration of the possibility of stereoscopic color photography with accurate measurements to replace the collection by shooting of rare species.

4. Further detailed ecological studies of the Canary Island birds begun principally by David A. Bannerman over 40 years ago, continued in 1948 by Lack and Southern, and by Cullen, et al., in 1949 and then by Helge Volsoe, the Danish ornithologist, who visited the islands in 1947 and his report is considered the finest one in existence.

Time Period for which support is requested: three years, January 1960, through January 1, 1963.

After realizing that an expedition of this sort should have a University backing, I prepared an application for a three-year study of the birds of the Canary Islands for the consideration of the Council of the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University. The Council, at a meeting in December, 1959, approved the plan in general and specifically approved a preliminary expedition to start January 1, 1960. I felt that there were enough of my friends and others interested in the subject who might be willing to contribute to such a venture by sending checks to Cornell University.

On the basis of our objectives and our University backing we were able to get a distinguished number of American and European ornithologists to act as an Advisory Committee. As I am not a professional ornithologist, I realized that our expedition must be able to attract men of this caliber who would come out and spend varying periods of time with me. I am happy to say that of the fifteen members, twelve have indicated to me their desire to do just this. Realizing that we must have a comfortable house for headquarters which would care for guests, we rented one in the small Spanish town of Bajamar on the northeast coast of the island of Tenerife.

We received many enthusiastic letters from ornithologists, but none more so than the Spanish authorities who have given us their complete cooperation. Professor Francisco Bernis of the Sociedad Española de Ornitología has supplied us with a generous quantity of rings.

The last two months have been spent in planning, organization and mist netting. We have been most fortunate in having as our first guest Wladyslaw Ryzdewski, Ph.D., one of the members of our Advisory Committee (and Publisher of THE RING, international banding magazine -Ed.).

We have been successful in banding birds of the following species:

Canary - *Serinus canarius*
Spanish Sparrow - *Passer hispaniolensis*
Linnet - *Carduelis cannabina*
Blackcap - *Sylvia atricapilla*
Berthelot's Pipit - *Anthus berthelotii*
Chaffinch - *Fringilla coelebs*
Rock Sparrow - *Petronia petronia*
Song Thrush - *Turdus ericetorum*
European Robin - *Erithacus rubecula*
Hoopoe - *Upupa epops*
Spectacled Warbler - *Sylvia conspicillata*

Bajamar, Tenerife, Islas Canarias, Spain