

MARYLAND BIRDLIFE

Bulletin of the Maryland Ornithological Society

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THE MARYLAND ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In response to an appeal by a group of bird students a meeting was held on February 23rd, 1945 at the Natural History Society of Maryland to organize a bird study club.

About 40 persons enrolled as charter members and appointed Irving E. Hampe as temporary chairman and Mrs. M. C. Kent as temporary secretary and treasurer. Mr. Ray J. Beasley was appointed chairman of a committee to draw up a constitution. A general program was discussed and approved. A meeting was called for March 9th at 8:30 P.M. to elect officers and adopt a constitution.

At the March 9th meeting the following officers were elected: Irving E. Hampe, president; Orville Crowder, vice-president; Mrs. Millard C. Kent, recording secretary; Miss Helen C. Klinka, corresponding secretary; and Millard Kent, treasurer.

The constitution and by-laws were discussed and after some minor changes were adopted. The President appointed committees on hikes, programs, membership, records and publications. The second Friday of each month was chosen for the regular meetings. The publication of a bi-monthly bulletin was approved. The membership had increased to 67 persons at this meeting.

The May meeting and the spring migration walks were well attended. Our bulletin made its appearance on time due to the cooperation of Mr. and Mrs. Millard C. Kent. At the June meeting it was decided to hold a picnic meeting in August instead of holding the regular indoor meetings. Regular meetings will be resumed in September. Our bulletin, now called MARYLAND BIRDLIFE, will be issued bi-monthly as planned.

This, briefly, is our progress to date. Our organization now has 97 members and with the cooperation of all members our future seems assured.

NOTES ON AN OVENBIRD NEST

On April 29th, 1945, about four o'clock in the afternoon, while walking through the grounds of the Mariners' Museum, near Newport News, Virginia, I was slightly startled when an Ovenbird flushed almost beneath my feet. The bird, apparently a female, started fluttering on the ground with both wings spread out as though broken. Realizing that I must have closely approached a nest I followed for about 25 or 30 feet to a spot where I could easily see every foot of the ground I had just passed, and awaited developments. By this time the bird had flown into some nearby low branches, twittering all the while, and flitting into one branch after another until she returned to about 10 or 15 feet from where I had first raised her. Another Ovenbird alighted in a taller tree some distance away. This bird, evidently the male of the pair, seemed to be keeping watch over the proceedings, and at least once while I was watching, chased away two other Ovenbirds that had been attracted by the disturbance. In the meantime, several Carolina Chickadees rushed to the scene, offering their assistance and sympathy.

Suddenly the disturbed Ovenbird stopped twittering, and seemingly satisfied that all danger was past, dropped quietly to the ground and disappeared. I immediately went to the spot where she had alighted, and presently found only a step or two away the characteristic Ovenbird nest, loosely constructed on the ground with a sort of thatched roof composed of dried weed stalks, grasses and leaves, completely covering the nest's occupants. Only the beady eyes and bill of the mother bird were visible through the entrance on one side.

On approaching the nest the mother bird again flew off exposing to view four naked babies, only a few days old. The mother had evidently been disturbed while feeding the young as only one of the four opened its mouth for feed, the others appearing content to be left alone.

Ray J. Beasley.

BIRD BOOKS FOR THE BEGINNER

While the possession of a good pair of binoculars, a notebook and pencil, and a field manual comprise the essential equipment for bird-watching in the field, no less important for the beginner is at least one good reference book containing brief but adequate descriptions of every bird apt to be encountered, together with general range and distribution, nesting habits, song and other concise but important information. A good book of colored plates is also a great advantage. To be of the most value, however, the colors must be as nearly true to life as our modern processes can produce. Otherwise, the beginner will meet with much confusion and some discouragement.

As the student advances, he will naturally wish to add to the scope of his reference library by obtaining books of a more scientific nature. He will, perhaps, wish more information on water birds and will seek a book written solely on that phase of bird-life. He may desire to delve farther into the subject of water game-birds, and will want a treatise containing more detailed data than can be found in the more popular books. Further, he may wish a book devoted to one species, as, for instance, the Canvasback, or one of many others.

In many cases such books have been written and are available. However, the further one specializes toward a single genus or species the fewer books he will find from which to choose. Sufficient research and study have not been made by individual authors to "fill" a book for each and every one of our wild birds. So, in addition to the more or less brief articles in existing bird-books, further information for many species will have to be sought in periodicals and bulletins of various educational institutions, museums, ornithological organizations and bird-clubs.

It should be borne in mind that to produce a book containing full details of every bird occurring in even a small section of our country with all noted observations and a colored plate or even black and white line drawing of each, would be far too expensive for the average person, and would result in a book of unwieldy proportions. Limited attempts along this line have been made, notably Forbush's BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS AND OTHER NEW ENGLAND STATES, Eaton's BIRDS OF NEW YORK, Robert's BIRDS OF MINNESOTA and Dawson's BIRDS OF CALIFORNIA. In each of the above cases the material has been broken up into three or more books, and later, except for Dawson's book, the plates have been reprinted into separate books with much briefer and more general descriptive matter. As further information has been obtained and more specific studies made, the observations as to range, habits and nesting soon become dated in so far as they are affected by the new data. Even with such books or sets colored plates or drawings are not provided for every bird for the reason that not all birds have been painted or drawn, particularly sub-species. Nor do such publications contain all the known written material for each or any particular bird. Copyright laws and publishers' interests, of course, preclude the collection of all such written and illustrative material into one repository.

It has been written that bird-books are only a "crutch to bird-study". A happier corollary would be that "bird-books are a shoe to bird-study". While the early pioneers were forced to go barefoot, that is, without the aid of satisfactory books, they found the way indeed very thorny and long, until exceptional observers began publishing their observations and collected data, and illustrating by drawings and paintings, the birds they had studied. Thanks to the information accumulated over the years in this way succeeding generations have found the way smoother and easier. And from the wealth of written observations and illustrations that have amassed, the beginner can learn as much in a comparatively short time as earlier students gathered in a lifetime.

It is, then, not necessary for the beginner to start the study of birds barefooted. Nor should he attempt to walk with his shoes in his hand or slung over his back. He must wear his shoes on his feet to obtain the most pleasure and profit. That is to say that he must closely associate his field efforts with what he can learn from the printed word left by those that have passed his way before. And in passing, he should make the way easier for those that follow by supplementing the already available information with his own written experiences.

A good many books have been written to introduce the beginner to the study of birds. While there is much of value in each, most of them fall short of being a practical guide, either because they are too general in character, do not contain sufficient scientific data or do not include all the birds a student is apt to encounter. Some of them are written for the juvenile mind and for that reason have little or no appeal to the adult, although they serve a very useful purpose in their sphere.

At the top of the list of guide books for use in the field Roger T. Peterson's FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS is undoubtedly pre-eminent. It is equally valuable for the beginner, juvenile or adult, and the advanced student. Written in understandable language, liberally illustrated in black and white, and in colors, and, above all, scientifically sound, no other field guide can quite approach it. It has also the advantage of being of a size easily carried in the hand or pocket. The user should realize, however, it is intended solely as a field identification guide, and should be used in connection with a more complete manual or reference book.

The reference book or manual that is recommended by most experienced bird students to beginners in the range covered by its contents is Dr. Frank M. Chapman's HANDBOOK OF BIRDS OF EASTERN NORTH AMERICA. Its popularity is extremely well deserved and it should be in every "birder's" library. There are, of course, many other good reference books covering particular regions of America. Generally, these books have been issued by various State Legislatures, written by State Ornithologists, or by interested educational institutions. Probably the most complete of these pertaining to the territory nearest to Maryland that are now available are BIRDS OF NORTH CAROLINA by T. Gilbert Pearson, C. S. Brimley and H. H. Brimley, and the BIRDS OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA by W. E. Clyde Todd. The latter has a good collection of exceptionally well-colored plates. It was written in 1940 and the former in 1942, so the data is quite up-to-date.

Other good books covering larger territories but containing many colored plates of birds occurring in this region are BIRDS OF AMERICA, T. Gilbert Pearson, editor-in-chief. This book, although quite generalized in character, describes about 1,000 birds, including most all the species and sub-species the student is apt to see in North America. NATURAL HISTORY OF BIRDS OF EASTERN AND CENTRAL AMERICA by Edward H. Forbush and John B. May is in reality an abridged edition of Forbush's BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS AND OTHER NEW ENGLAND STATES, and is very complete,

although many of the life-histories are very short and out-moded due to recent investigations. But the colored plates are, on the whole, of the best; except for four by Peterson, all are by Fuertes and Brooks. These two books should eventually find their way to every bird student's bookshelves, and the sooner they do, the sooner their owner's store of bird-lore will be enriched and enhanced. Also of particular value from the standpoint of richness and accuracy of color of the plates is Thomas Sadler Robert's BIRD PORTRAITS IN COLOR. 295 birds, most of which occur in this area, are beautifully portrayed in very natural colors. Adequate descriptions of the birds shown has been greatly sacrificed to keep the volume within about 90 pages of text.

As the student advances in the art of identification, books describing various classes of birds will be desired. HAWKS OF NORTH AMERICA by John B. May contains very complete descriptions and life-histories as well as good colored plates of all the hawks in this country. THE DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS OF NORTH AMERICA by Francis H. Kortwright covers very thoroughly all waterfowl. The colored plates and illustrations by T. M. Shortt included in the latter book are probably the most profused and true to life of any to be found in any book yet published treating solely of one class of bird. BIRDS OF THE OCEAN by W. B. Alexander contains good descriptions and life-histories of our oceanic birds. Well illustrated in black and white but has no colored plates. WARBLERS OF NORTH AMERICA by Frank M. Chapman is the best treatise on that subject but has been out of print for some years.

For books on bird behavior, flight, home life and songs, the most popular are BOOK OF BIRD LIFE by Arthur A. Allen, exceptionally well written and informative; BIRD FLIGHT by Gordon Aymar, well illustrated by photographs of birds in flight; HOME LIFE OF BIRDS by Francis H. Herrick, of special interest to students of nests and nesting habits; and a GUIDE TO BIRD SONGS by Arctas A. Saunders. THE MIGRATION OF BIRDS by Alexander Wetmore and THE MIGRATION OF AMERICAN BIRDS by Frederick C. Lincoln are both good books on migration. However, so much new data is constantly being published on this subject that any book soon becomes dated and its value correspondingly decreased.

In addition to the foregoing many books covering separate classes or single species have been published. They are highly specialized and consequently extremely scientific in content. The most important of these are the Bulletin issued by the U.S. National Museum under the editorship of A. C. Bent. Each of these Bulletins contain only certain orders of birds and are issued from time to time in limited quantities which rapidly become exhausted. To date 14 have been issued. Others are in the course of preparation. When these have been completed all the birds of North America will have been included, and will contain more data concerning each bird than anything ever published in this country.

And last but by no means least, a book that has only recently been released, but which deserves particular commendation is Joseph J. Hickey's GUIDE TO BIRD WATCHING. It is not a book primarily devoted to the usual various phases of bird life but presents the whole subject of bird watching from an entirely new and delightfully refreshing viewpoint. The beginner, as well as the more experienced observer, will learn from it what to watch for while in the field, and how to translate his observations into terms of bird behavior. Its use will lead into habits of study and observation that will produce a more thorough understanding of bird life and will result in a tremendous increase to our store of ornithological information.

Ray J. Beasley.

MARYLAND ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Organized April 9, 1945

"The object of this Club shall be to record the observations of bird life in Maryland; to disseminate in a popular manner the results of such observations; to collate the scientific data furnished by bird students throughout the State, and to supply such available information to other groups as requested; and to promote the cultivation of public sentiment in the preservation of our native bird life."

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