



Ben B. Coffey, Jr. (1904-1993) and his wife Lula at their Memphis home "Coffey Grounds."

THE MISSISSIPPI LEGACY OF BEN B. COFFEY, JR.

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Ben B. Coffey, Jr., life member of the Mississippi Ornithological Society and life-long friend and benefactor of Mississippi birds and birders, died in Memphis, Tennessee, on 22 August 1993. He was 89. Born in Nashville, Tennessee, on 28 April 1904, Ben grew up in Tennessee and attended Vanderbilt University and Armour (now Illinois) Institute of Technology. He was retired from the Tennessee Inspection Bureau where he had worked as a fire protection and rating engineer. Although known to most of us as a "Tennessee" birder who has contributed much to Mississippi ornithology, Ben, in fact, had many ties to our state. His father was from Lafayette County; his mother from Iuka; and his wife, Lula, from Hickory Flat. In "'The Mid-South Bird Notes' of Ben B. Coffey, Jr." (Jackson 1981) I presented a brief biography of Ben, a list of his publications, and a republication of his "Mid-South Bird Notes" -- a mimeographed newsletter that kept mid-South birders in touch with one another and greatly advanced both knowledge and interest in birds of the region. For many of the details of Ben's life, I refer readers to that publication. In this memorial tribute, however, I would like to focus on some of Ben's other contributions to Mississippi ornithology.

Ben became interested in birds as a Boy Scout and perhaps it was because of his love of birds and the out-of-doors that he reached scouting's highest rank, Eagle. He never lost his enthusiasm for birds or Boy Scouts. For years he served as a scoutmaster and he was known for the excitement of birding and bird banding that he shared with his scouts. Records provided by herons and egrets that Ben and his scouts banded in the Mississippi Delta contributed immensely to our understanding of the migratory movements of these birds. In 1934 Ben received the Silver Beaver award -- scouting's highest honor for adult leaders. Many of Ben's scouts continue as active birders today.

Perhaps the qualities that I think of most when considering Ben's contributions to our understanding of Mississippi birds are his persistence, his thoroughness, his missionary zeal in sharing what he had learned with others, and his willingness to jump in and help with, and help promote, cooperative efforts required for large-scale studies of birds. Ben was always ready to go the extra mile -- or thousands of miles. How many thousands of miles he and Lula drove to complete breeding bird surveys and Christmas Bird Counts in Mississippi long before there was a Mississippi Ornithological Society! One particular Mississippi Christmas Bird Count of Ben's gained national recognition because of where it was -- centered on the town of Rara Avis.

When the Bird-Banding Lab wanted a cooperative effort to learn about the migration of Chimney Swifts, Ben pitched in and, with the aid of Lula and his scouts and birding friends, he banded more than 113,000 swifts -- many from Mississippi. It was fitting that when 13 banded Chimney Swifts were found on their South American wintering area, five were ones banded by Ben and Lula. When George Lowery at Louisiana State University began studying the nocturnal migration of birds by focusing a telescope on the moon and watching the silhouettes of birds as they passed overhead, Ben set up a volunteer station in Memphis and encouraged others to do so.

When I first came to Mississippi, Ben made certain I had a copy of Burleigh's publication on birds of the Gulf coast. He also sent me a copy of a checklist of Mississippi birds that he had put together and distributed decades before there were M.O.S. checklists. Ben could always be counted on to provide sound data for the Central Southern Region reports in Audubon Field Notes and American Birds -- often so detailed and valuable that they became the subjects of special "sa's" -- American Birds' "essays" calling for special attention.

In more recent decades Ben had a deep interest in the dynamics of range changes in Chuck-will's-widows and Whip-poor-wills and he and Lula would drive all night across the backroads of north Mississippi collecting data on where each species was and wasn't. In the late 1940s the Coffey's began making frequent trips to the tropics where they became masters at recording bird vocalizations. Their recordings have been used on numerous tapes and records (e.g., Coffey and Coffey 1989, Hardy and Coffey 1988, Hardy et al.

1989a, b) and in numerous scientific studies. They now constitute the "Coffey Neotropical Collection" in the archives at the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida.

Of Ben Coffey's more than 120 publications, approximately 50 included at least some information about Mississippi birds. The scientific quality of Ben's work was recognized by his election as a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1991. The student of Mississippi birds could well turn first to the work and writings of Ben B. Coffey, Jr. for an overview and understanding of the nature of our avifauna.

Shortly before his death, Ben and Lula gave the Mississippi Ornithological Society an endowment to further publication of the Mississippi Kite. It was a legacy that mirrored Ben's ideals and his life. The one characteristic of Ben's that should be emulated by every student of Mississippi birds -- from the rankest amateur to the professional -- is his care in keeping field notes *and* seeing that those notes got to the publication or repository where they could be used to further our understanding of birds. Ben, you gave us so much in so many ways!

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