

HISTORICAL BIRD RECORDS FROM THOMAS COUNTY, GEORGIA

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While researching the Florida hermitage of Charles J. Pennock (see Kastner 1986:91-96), I found that he had sojourned parts of two winters during the late 1880s in Thomas County, Georgia, and had collected bird specimens there. The specimens were deposited in the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. When a list of the specimens was provided to me by the Academy, they were intermixed with other Thomas County specimens collected by the “Rehn Expedition” of 1904. As neither of these activities was mentioned in Griffin’s “History of Ornithology in Georgia” (Griffin 1958), a brief account of them is provided here.

Pennock’s Georgia experiences were described by him in correspondence with Robert W. Williams. Williams’ family lived in Tallahassee, Florida, while he worked in Washington, DC (Allen 1941); the letters are archived at Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, Florida.

Charles John Pennock was a native of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, a businessman who worked primarily in Pennsylvania and adjacent Delaware, and a widely-known and respected ornithologist (Stone 1935). The latest ornithological treatment of Delaware credits Pennock with “groundbreaking work” and judges him as having done “more than any other to place Delaware Ornithology on a firm footing” (Hess et al. 2000:23-24). Thus, his observations in Thomas County, backed by some specimen evidence, are credible.

Pennock wrote to Williams on 4 October 1904: “I spent two winters at Thomasville, Ga. some years ago—’87-’88 and ’88-’89.” On 13 October 1904, he elaborated, and included a list of species he observed “from Nov. 20—1887 to about March 8 1888,” and said “I have mislaid my notes for the following winter....” On 19 October 1904, he repeated this: “I do not seem able to find my full notes on my last winter at Thomasville....” However, he did find some records of

“arrivals at Thomasville 1889.”

Most unfortunately there is little new information in his notes or the specimen list. In his winter list of 1887-1888, he noted “a few” Kentucky Warblers (*Oporornis formosus*); these records fall outside the presently known dates for this species (26 March—10 October, Crawford 1998), but he did not give any specific winter dates.

He listed an undated Black-throated Bunting (Dickcissel [*Spiza americana*]; Banks 1988); this winter record would be outside the presently known migration dates and would be the second [i.e., first by date, but second recorded account] winter record. In his letter dated 19 October 1904, he commented on this species: “Regarding the Black-thr Bunting I took one specimen at Thomasville it was in poor plumage & wet with an accident & so damaged that I did not keep it...”

He listed, with no date, “one” Harlan’s Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*); this may be the only credible report of this taxon from the State, so the lack of a specific date is most regrettable.

His subjective appraisals of abundance for the 79 species on which he comments (e.g., “numerous,” “a few seen”) would be similar if such subjective comments were given in 2004. He noted, however, only one Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), a species considered common now (Crawford 1998). Stoddard (1978:69), writing about the Grady County environs that would include adjacent Thomas County, stated that the species had “...staged a spectacular comeback in all parts of the range with which I am acquainted, possibly because woodsmen and trappers no longer eat them as a regular fare.”

Pennock’s “Arrivals at Thomasville 1889” list of 19 October 1904, includes some dated records of interest:

- Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*), 21 March 1889; the second (i.e., the first) spring record for that species.
- Bewick’s Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*), 22 March 1889; the “new” late spring record (the previous was 19 March 1960).
- Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), 22 March 1889; the “new” early spring record (the previous was 24 March 1959).

James Abram Garfield Rehn (of the Rehn Expedition, 1904) was, apparently, primarily an entomologist. He and perhaps others were in

Thomas County at least between 10 March and 1 April 1904, where he collected several bird specimens that are now in the Academy collection. One specimen of American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), Academy # 48472, collected on 1 April 1904, is a “new” early spring migration date for this species in Thomas County.

These accounts of Pennock’s and Rehn’s observations of birds provide new insight into the presence of species during winter and spring, respectively. It is unfortunate that their notes were not more thorough, and that they did not provide comments on species that have since become extinct.

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