

IN MEMORIAM: JOSSELYN VAN TYNE

BY HAROLD MAYFIELD

JOSSELYN VAN TYNE was a major figure in American ornithology. His reputation was international, and few men have had as wide an acquaintance and as high a reputation among bird students, amateur and professional. His published works give little hint of the influence he exercised. Probably his greatest contribution was made in the behind-the-scenes role of editor, counselor, and teacher. Yet his publications were substantial, even though his most ambitious projects were interrupted by death.

Josselyn Van Tyne was born May 11, 1902, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the son of Claude Halstead Van Tyne and Isabella Joslin Van Tyne. His father was a distinguished historian, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then at the University of Michigan, where he eventually became Chairman of the History Department. Among his father's professional honors were appointment as visiting lecturer on two occasions in British and French universities and the award (posthumously) of the Pulitzer Prize in 1930 for the best book of the year in American history. The marriage of Josselyn Van Tyne and Helen Belfield Bates in 1933 united two prominent Ann Arbor families. Her father was the late Henry M. Bates, for many years Dean of the University of Michigan Law School and widely acclaimed as the man who brought that school to eminence.

Like many other ornithologists, Van, as he was known to most friends, showed an interest in birds early in life. This interest was stimulated by acquaintance with Norman A. Wood and others at the Museum of Zoology in Ann Arbor and by trips with his father, who enjoyed hiking and canoeing. As a man Van still recalled his sense of loss when his hand became too large to go into a flicker hole.

In his teens Van became tall, eventually reaching six feet, seven inches. Although his adult weight exceeded 200 pounds, his large frame seemed spare. In his teens he attended Culver Military Academy, where he won scholastic honors and medals for marksmanship. Both abilities were to serve him well in ornithology.

He earned the A.B. degree at Harvard in 1925 and the Ph.D. degree at Michigan in 1928, writing his doctoral thesis on the life history of the Short-keeled Toucan, *Ramphastos brevicarinatus*, for which he did his field work on Barro Colorado Island in the Panama Canal Zone. This was one of the first detailed life-history studies of a tropical species. His special interest in the toucans continued throughout his life.



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He joined the Museum of Zoology at the University of Michigan as Assistant Curator of Birds and in 1931 became Curator, a position he held until his death. In the Zoology Department, he was appointed Instructor in 1930 and advanced through the intervening grades to Professor in 1953. In recent years most of his teaching efforts were directed toward graduate students. Much of his teaching was done by counsel and example.

His accomplishments as Curator were impressive. During his period in the museum, the collection of bird skins was increased tenfold by additions from many parts of the world and enriched by other ornithological specimens, skeletons, eggs, and nests. Today it is one of the great research collections of the world, and is particularly rich in birds of North and Middle America and southern Asia, and in extinct forms. The ornithological library under his direction also grew from small beginnings to one of the best to be found anywhere. The collections were maintained with such orderliness and care that more than one private collector was prompted to deposit his own items there after a visit to Ann Arbor.

He had an instinct for collecting and kept some items that others might have discarded, but he did so in the conviction that certain things might have an unforeseen future value. His favorite adjective in describing a feature of the collection was "useful." He thought of the museum as a place to work. He encouraged sincere students to make use of the collection and was generous in loaning specimens, with due consideration for their safety.

Everything having to do with birds was of interest to Van, and his knowledge of ornithological literature was comprehensive. However, his research was principally in the fields of systematics, distribution, ecology, and life history. Most of his time was spent inside his office and the museum, but every year he aimed to get out at least once on an extended field trip. Over the years, his travels carried him to Indo-China (the Kelley-Roosevelt expedition of 1928-1929), the Panama Canal Zone, Guatemala, British Honduras, Yucatan, the Bahamas, Canadian Arctic, Europe, the Chisos Mountains of Texas, and nearly every part of Michigan. He was a productive collector, and thousands of near-perfect bird skins, many of them preserved under difficult tropical conditions, give evidence of his skill as a preparator.

His chief published works, in addition to the paper on the toucan, were as follows: two papers on the results of the expedition to Indo-China (with O. Bangs); "The Birds of Northern Petén, Guatemala" (1935); several papers on the birds of the Chisos-Rio Grande area of

Texas; "Check-List of the Birds of Michigan" (1938); several papers on the Kirtland's Warbler; the ornithological portions of "Island Life in Lake Michigan," published by Cranbrook (1948); and the chapters on the Kirtland's Warbler and Colima Warbler in Bent's "Life Histories" (1953).

The most important of his unfinished projects was his college textbook of ornithology, on which he had been working for several years. Another was his proposed monograph on the Kirtland's Warbler, which had been his principal field study for twenty-five years. In the last year of his life he was also engaged in preparing reports on the birds of British Honduras, Yucatan, and Bylot Island in the Canadian Arctic. It is expected that associates in these projects will carry them on to completion.

It was as an editor that Van did much of his best work. While editor of 'The Wilson Bulletin' from 1939 to 1948, he achieved a degree of perfection that set a new standard for ornithological journals. He was discriminating in his judgments of value and concerned that the literature not be burdened by trivial and verbose papers. He was meticulous about facts and checked references painstakingly. He was not only alert to ambiguity and obscurity but also sensitive to grace in the use of language.

The polished result was not accomplished without effort. Sometimes he put more work into editing papers than the authors did in the original writing. Some people leaned upon his editing until they seemed to give less care than usual to the preparation of papers sent to him, knowing he would "fix" them. Others resented the fine combing of their manuscripts, protesting that the final product was a "rehash." No editor could have tried harder to be diplomatic when asking, in effect, "Exactly what *do* you mean?" Few editors asked it as many times.

Everything that came to his hand received this same care—papers written by his students, papers issued through his division of the museum, rough drafts sent him for advice, and reports of committees on which he served, such as the A.O.U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature. In giving so much attention to editorial matters, he was moved not only by a desire to help people but by a conviction that here he was fulfilling a need in ornithology. "How better can you teach?" he said. And indeed it is doubtful if some papers would ever have been put into suitable condition for publication without his guidance. His voluminous mail received the same conscientious treatment.

Much of his time for several years, for example, was spent in editing

and rewriting the manuscript of "The Birds of Michigan" by Norman A. Wood, after Mr. Wood's death. But his important role is not revealed on the title page of that work, nor is it adequately indicated elsewhere in the book.

For this anonymous and, at times, thankless contribution to ornithology, he paid a high price. His expenditure of energy was tremendous. He consulted with others, but he did not find it easy to delegate responsibility; therefore, the major part of each editorial burden fell on his own shoulders. His answer to this problem was unrelenting work. Seven o'clock in the morning found him at his desk. Unless he had a meeting or a guest, the evening found him steadily at work. This was the pattern nearly every day, with no exception for Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays. His idea of a vacation was a field trip, with correspondence still coming from his pen each evening. Although he was a man of wide interests, he deliberately rationed his attentions outside his professional field, with a sense of inner compulsion that there was so much to do and so little time to do it. In a characteristic statement for the twenty-fifth anniversary report of his Harvard class, he expressed satisfaction that his work was his hobby but regret that the days were so short.

In spite of this prodigious effort, his own scientific output suffered. He was constantly so busy readying other people's manuscripts for publication that he sometimes fell years behind schedule on his own. He was not a rapid worker, but his published notes and papers were models of clarity and precision.

Although he preferred to work alone and in his early career was inclined to view many human contacts as distractions, he later came increasingly to enjoy the company of people and to appreciate the importance of cooperative effort. He became an active worker in various organizations.

His towering figure was a landmark at A.O.U. meetings from the time of his joining in 1922. He attended the Denver meeting in September, 1956, although his physical condition required him to rest a part of each day. He served on many committees of the A.O.U., including the important Committee on Classification and Nomenclature for fifteen years, and was elected Fellow in 1936. As president from 1950 to 1953, he brought dignity and friendliness to the office. It was he who instituted the President's Coffee Hour at the annual meetings. On the Council of the A.O.U. he was a thoughtful and conservative force.

He also played a prominent part in the Wilson Ornithological Society. In addition to his ten years as editor of "The Wilson Bulletin,"

he served as president from 1935 to 1937. For many years up to the time of his death, he provided the guidance for the Wilson Society library, making it possible for isolated students to have access to a first-class library by mail. He secured housing for this library in the museum and provided much of the care of it with his own hands.

He felt a strong responsibility toward the host of people with a slight interest in birds. He welcomed them in the museum, answered their letters courteously, and cultivated their friendship. For many years he was a member of the Advisory Committee of the Michigan Audubon Society and participated as an adviser in various local groups. He was the acknowledged authority on the birds of his state.

He was a member of the Board of the Cranbrook Institute of Science from 1934 and Chairman of its Committee on Publications from 1940 until his death. In 1954 he was president of the Ecology section of the International Ornithological Congress at Basel, Switzerland.

People meeting him for the first time usually found him somewhat formal, dignified, and serious—even to the point of austerity. This quality, combined with a keen, logical mind and a precise use of language, caused some people, including professional colleagues, to choose their words carefully with him. On the other hand, in congenial company he revealed a talent for humor, usually in the form of a gentle wisecrack—never acid nor personal. In times of relaxation, this was always close to the surface and added much to the charm of his personality. It bubbled up anywhere, any time; and his usual reserve left him completely in occasional moments of quiet, shaking laughter. His papers at the meetings of the American Ornithologists' Union were almost unique in that, although basically serious, they were enlivened by touches of humor. A small card on the outside of his office door, "Please knock and come in," gave visitors a hint of his reserve and friendliness.

He was never talkative and seldom revealed his inner thoughts. At times when traveling or camping, he would not utter a word for an hour or more and later would resume conversation on some commonplace subject, with no indication of his previous reflections. Unlike most of us, he seemed rarely to think aloud. On the other hand, he was friendly with people and generous with favors toward them, many of which he preferred to keep anonymous.

He was given to strong enthusiasms for people, often for people he knew only casually, a surprising trait in a man so analytical and detached about other matters. In idealizing certain of his friends,

he sometimes laid himself open to serious disappointment, because his high opinions did not always survive the strain of prolonged association or collaborative work. When people fell in his esteem, they fell far.

His standards were very high. But more significant in his personal relationships was the fact that he often saw issues of uncompromising principle in matters that to others were mere differences of opinion. To him such issues were black or white. Although controversy disturbed him, his strong sense of duty led him to champion more than one unpopular cause. In such instances, he had the courage to stand alone. His feelings in such matters were strong, but he showed the greatest restraint in commenting about them, and, if he named individuals at all, he leaned backward to be fair. I considered myself one of his more intimate friends for twenty years, but usually I learned only by inference or from another source that he was having a disagreement of a disturbing kind. While most of us blow off steam in the privacy of friendship, I can scarcely remember his offering an uncomplimentary remark about anyone. The rare exception was in those cases where people were being considered for appointment to responsible tasks, and he was under an obligation to express an opinion.

Although utterly out of sympathy with people he considered false to principle or failing to live up to their knowledge and abilities, he showed the greatest respect for and patience with sincere people, however limited their ability. His best friends were to be found in surprisingly diverse walks of life.

His basic gentleness was revealed in other ways as well. He was most reluctant to voice an opinion on political or religious issues for fear of hurting someone's feelings. He detested practical jokes.

He was a person of the highest integrity, unswervingly honest and true to his beliefs. Never once did he fight for his personal gain; it was always to defend a principle or a friend. He was exceptionally free of cynicism, convinced that right would prevail.

He reflected seriously on his own faults and worked unceasingly to overcome them. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a zeal for self-improvement was one of his dominant characteristics. It was revealed in his choice of reading material, the meetings he attended, and the notes he wrote to himself.

As his associate on more than a dozen field trips of one to five weeks each, I found him a perfect companion. In small matters, he was almost embarrassingly considerate and polite. Indeed, I was often hesitant to suggest a plan of activity for fear that he would

silently give up a preference of his own to go along with a lightly expressed choice of mine. He enjoyed company on trips but made little effort to coordinate his efforts closely with those of another person, preferring to work silently on his own independent investigations.

He was an intense field worker, and only one other matter took occasional precedence over his studies—his hearty appetite. He always made sure the car was stocked with groceries, and in mid-morning and mid-afternoon in the field I could depend on hearing the car door slam as he got a doughnut. His clock-like regularity of arrival at the luncheon site made it inevitable that he would be appointed camp cook, a task that he performed creditably.

The care with which he worked was characteristic of the man. He noted only what he saw unmistakably. He described his observations on the spot, using three-by-five-inch cards that he carried in his pocket. He distrusted his memory (which was excellent) and even his own senses, where his observations were brief or unsatisfactory. More than once I have heard him remark quietly, "This morning I saw a bird (or an event) that does not exist."

In the last year, his strength ebbed steadily and he knew he was dangerously ill, but he attempted to continue life as usual, saying as little about his condition as possible, even to his closest friends. In the summer of 1956 he managed to spend a few days in the field with his favorite study, the Kirtland's Warbler. Finally, when he became too ill to do creative work, he corrected proof on the Fifth Edition of the A.O.U. Check-List. To the end, his work was his life.

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