

IN MEMORIAM: OLIVER L. AUSTIN JR.

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OLIVER L. AUSTIN JR., 1903-1988

From a photograph taken in 1973 during his tenure as Editor of *The Auk*.
The logo, his customary "signature," was used on all his ornithological correspondence.

Oliver Luther Austin Jr., Fellow of the AOU, Editor of *The Auk* from 1968 to 1977, and Curator Emeritus in Ornithology at the Florida Museum of Natural History, died quietly in his sleep on New Year's Eve day, 1988; he was 85.

Born in Tuckahoe, New York, on 24 May 1903,

Oliver did his undergraduate work at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he deepened his early interest in birds by cataloging and rearranging the collections in the old college museum, and by working in Charles William Beebe's laboratory in British Guiana. It was at

Wesleyan that Oliver acquired his nickname "Ickky," after informing the editor of a campus publication, "The Wasp," that a cover illustration labeled simply "wasp" was in fact a picture of an ichneumon fly. After Wesleyan (B.S. 1926), Oliver went to Harvard University and the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ). The outstanding group of ornithologists there at the time, particularly Glover Allen, Outram Bangs, and Jim Peters, had a strong influence on him. For instance, in later years whenever Oliver had a question about the usage of an ornithological word in an *Auk* manuscript, he would turn to his well-worn copy of Webster's Second Edition to "see what Glover [Allen, who had written that definition] had to say" about it—and almost invariably he followed the advice of his mentor.

While at Harvard, Oliver continued to travel and collect, serving as naturalist on the Mason-Budgett Expedition in 1927, collecting for the MCZ on the Yucatan Peninsula and in British Honduras. Oliver and his physician father made a reconnaissance trip to the Labrador coast in 1926 to assess that part of Canada for serious ornithological study. They sailed their 55-foot schooner, 'Ariel,' to Labrador in 1927 and 1928. This fieldwork resulted in Oliver's doctoral dissertation, which was published in 1932 by the Nuttall Ornithological Club as "The Birds of Newfoundland Labrador." Oliver always recalled his MCZ years with great fondness and was especially proud of receiving Harvard's first doctorate in ornithology (1931).

When Oliver completed his degree, the Depression had begun. In 1930, he began work for the Bureau of Biological Survey in Minnesota doing fieldwork with Vernon and Florence Merriam Bailey. He later surveyed waterfowl, particularly terns, on the East Coast. But after two years, the Depression had reached its height and many government biologists were laid off. Oliver and his wife Elizabeth ("Sliver"; see *Auk* 95: 437-438, 1978) returned to New York and did what they could to earn a living—including a short stint by Oliver ("an interesting experience") at Macy's Department Store. They soon moved to Cape Cod where Oliver and Sliver always said they raised orchids and played bridge (for money) to survive the Depression years. Along with his nursery-florist business, Oliver also directed the Austin Ornithological Research Station at Wellfleet, which he and his father had founded in 1929. He conducted research there, largely on the tern colonies of the

Cape, and taught young ornithologists such as Seth Low and Maurice Broun who studied at the station.

At the beginning of World War II, Oliver—a Cape Codder with years of sailing experience—enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He served as a line officer in the South Pacific through the war. Wherever his tanker docked, Oliver collected specimens—in the Solomons, Gilbert and Ellice Islands, New Caledonia, and New Hebrides—and sent the skins to the MCZ. Two of the bats he collected were new, and the one from Guadalcanal was named for him.

At the end of the war, Oliver was stationed for almost a year in Korea. He continued to collect and he published "The Birds of Korea" in 1948. In 1946 he transferred to Japan to serve on General MacArthur's personal staff to organize and head the Wildlife Branch of the Occupation government until late 1949. During his years in Japan, Oliver came to know and love the country, its people and culture. He became good friends with several members of the Japanese nobility—well-trained biologists—and through them was introduced to the fascinating, centuries-old methods of wildlife management in that country. Perhaps only a few American banders are aware that, among other things, Oliver introduced the Japanese mist net to the U.S. His position on General MacArthur's staff afforded the chance to work with influential Japanese. Oliver wrote a set of modern wildlife regulations that were well accepted by the Japanese people (and at least officially by the American Occupation Forces). Most of these conservation laws are still in effect. After the Occupation the Japanese government adopted Austin's game laws, conservation regulations, and sanctuary programs virtually unchanged.

Oliver returned to Cape Cod in 1950 and received a Guggenheim fellowship to write, with the Marquis Nagahisa Kuroda, the classic "The Birds of Japan, Their Status and Distribution" (1953).

Subsequently, the Austin family moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where Oliver served as Professor of Zoology at the Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base. During the next few years he also edited publications for several branches of the military and spent 4 months in Antarctica in 1955-1956 on an Admiral Byrd expedition, "Operation Deep Freeze."

In 1957 Oliver received a telephone call from

J. C. Dickinson Jr., an old friend from the MCZ and at that time the Director of the Florida State Museum (FSM). J. C. wanted Oliver's suggestions for candidates for Curator of Birds at the FSM. Oliver thought about it for a moment, and then replied, "How about me?" J. C. was rather taken aback because he thought Dr. Austin far too senior to want to take over a relatively small collection in a struggling new museum. But Oliver wanted to settle into a museum environment and was glad to begin building a collection even though at the time it wasn't much more than the significant Doe collection of eggs. So he and Sliver moved to Gainesville and, at last, put down their roots. They bought an old Victorian house and proceeded to make it and its garden one of the showplaces of the town. Some AOU members will recall a gracious reception in that garden during the 1963 Annual Meeting.

Oliver gradually built the bird skin collection from 1,800 to more than 17,500 specimens. When the new Florida State Museum (now the Florida Museum of Natural History) was built and the growing collection was installed in a large range, room was included for Oliver's books and journals, which he gave to the museum after his retirement. It is now the Austin Memorial Library.

Another major accomplishment during the Gainesville years was to write "Birds of The World" (1961), which enjoyed enormous success and eventually was published in seven languages (including British English—the entire text being reset from the American edition!). He also built a lasting reputation as an editor. Oliver first drew recognition in this capacity by editing the final three volumes (Fringillidae) of A. C. Bent's "Life Histories of North American Birds" (1968). He edited *The Auk* for 10 years, increasing its number of pages by approximately 50% over the previous decade. He was rigorous and painstaking in his devotion to the work, unyielding in his efforts to keep the journal of the first quality—scientifically and grammatically. Many authors who considered their writing style to be perfectly acceptable grew as red in the face (from chagrin or anger?) as the red-penciled manuscripts returned by Oliver for revision. Oliver made many friends among people grateful for the help (including the authors of his Memorial), but also some enemies from those who considered his nitpicking overbearing. There was certainly something about

Oliver's strong personality and opinion—you really liked him, or you didn't.

After his retirement as *Auk* editor at the end of 1976, Oliver was occupied mainly with caring for Elizabeth; her rapidly declining health led to her death in May 1977. Their staunch friend Edythe Rich, whom (with her late husband, Vincent) the Austins had known since their days in Japan, visited them during this painful period and greatly assisted Oliver who was suffering from the vacuum left by the relinquished editorship. Oliver and Edythe subsequently undertook, in January 1978, their "geriatric marriage," as they liked to call it, and settled into a charming "country cottage" south of the city. They added a guest wing, a green house for Oliver's orchids, bird baths, feeders, a garden plot, and Purple Martin accommodations (house and gourds).

Oliver flourished in his new surroundings, in no small degree because of Edythe, who brought out a mellower "Ickky" that some of us had seen only infrequently. He resumed his interest in bird banding and joined Hardy in a weekly call-in radio program, "The Birdwatcher," on a university station. Oliver had served as museum-resident expert for the program for years, but now he drove to campus to man his own microphone in the studio. Clench joined in, as well, during her time at the FSM. "The Birdwatcher" was a real test for the mellower Dr. Austin who, ear-to-ear with an occasional witless caller, necessarily refrained from all but the slightest sarcasm or impatience in dealing with, for example, a lady who was telling him about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in her backyard! Oliver had a great time and endeared himself to the local residents in this capacity through spring, 1984.

Among the most enjoyable adventures that the new Austins undertook were two or three visits a year to Wassaw Island, one of the Georgia Sea Isles near Savannah, that Edythe's family (Parsons) had owned for more than 100 years. The family had given the property to the Federal Government which designated it a National Wildlife Refuge in 1969, but reserved the use of the family compound—the only buildings on the otherwise-wild island—with freedom to roam the beaches, marshes, and almost primeval forest. We were privileged to be guests, to experience Wassaw. In his late seventies and early eighties then, Oliver continued to enjoy a vigorous constitution. At Wassaw, he jumped

out of bed at dawn to unfurl the mist nets in the woods near the beach and visited them hourly until dusk. These were to be his last wonderful days in field study and they were pure magic for him—and us. In the evenings at the old island house, he played his romping stride piano tributes to Fats Waller and Art Tatum (whom he idolized) and recalled the zany lyrics of old college-days songs that perhaps only he in all the world remembered.

Oliver attended his last AOU meeting in 1983 in New York and even then was beginning to suffer from the painful arthritis that almost immobilized him by 1984 and led to hip surgery in November of that year. He only partially recovered from that and never walked well again. Most of his last years were spent at home, usually in a wheelchair. He read, typed manuscripts for Edythe, edited the Florida Museum's *Bulletin in Biological Sciences* (until 1987), watched the birds, especially the Purple Martins, supervised the work in the greenhouse and garden, enjoyed frequent dinner and weekend guests from near and far, and worked his beloved Double Crostics. Impaired circulation in his legs led to an amputation in early 1988 but despite that shock he rallied and his senses remained clear. Just before the holidays in De-

cember 1988, he received as a guest a television producer from Japan, who videotaped and interviewed him for a forthcoming documentary on the birds of Japan. That was his last formal ornithological act.

Hardy visited Oliver the day before he died and talked with him about the Christmas bird census. His responses to the count's discoveries were those of a mind still rational. In early afternoon on the year's last day, he was awake for a short conversation with Edythe, which closed with the softly spoken words, "I think I'll go now."

At his request, his passing was not marked by a memorial service. Instead, he had a hum-dinger of an "Irish Jazz Wake," complete with piano player; long-time friends came from all over the country.

Oliver L. Austin Jr. was an intense, provocative man, a strong link with the ornithology of the 19th and early 20th century, and one of those kinds who are always hard to relinquish. He is survived by his wife, two sons, Anthony and Timothy, his sister Dolly, and four grandchildren. His body was given to medical science and his ashes will eventually be deposited in a gravesite in Snow Cemetery at Truro, Massachusetts.