

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Condor 88:402-403
© The Cooper Ornithological Society 1986

WHO WAS "COOPER"?

At several recent meetings of the Cooper Ornithological Society, members of the History Committee have been questioned by younger members about why the Society is called "Cooper." Even the oldest members now are unlikely to have been active in ornithological endeavors prior to 1902, when life ended for the man who had been honored nine years earlier by those who used his name for a new ornithology club in California. Hence this note about Dr. James G. Cooper (1830-1902), who was one of the earliest to study birds in the far western United States.

The Cooper Ornithological "Club" was organized in 1893 almost simultaneously by two groups of young men working separately in the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles areas. It is not exactly clear from historical records just how these two groups combined and settled on the Cooper name all within the same year. By the time that the fledgling organization had begun to publish its own journal in 1899, however, it was considered appropriate that club president W. Otto Emerson write a profile or sketch of the man who had served as mentor for many of the members of the new group. It appeared as the lead article in the first issue of the *Bulletin* of the Cooper Ornithological Club. (The *Bulletin* was renamed *The Condor* the following year.) Most of the comments which follow are taken from that article or from "In Memoriam: Dr. James G. Cooper" (*Condor* 4:101-103) also written by Emerson. The latter was followed by an annotated list of the ornithological writings of Dr. Cooper, prepared by Joseph Grinnell.

In Emerson's accounts, the tone is set by such phrases as "friend and guide," "teacher's manner," and "lessons of bird life in the field"; and Cooper was extolled as "a man who could lead you in paths of Nature to the haunts of birds, to the lurking places of shells, or to hidden fossils, and could name for you the rocks, trees and plants of the mountains, hills and plains." Dr. Cooper, in his later years, and Emerson both lived in Haywards (now known as Hayward), California—as did several other early members of the Cooper Club. (The name was changed to "Society" much later.) Stanford University was a major center of ornithological activity in the 1890s and early 1900s, and several other founders came from that area.

Joseph Grinnell, Harry Swarth, and others important in the Society's history, however, were part of the "southern" group then. Nevertheless Cooper's work was apparently familiar to them also, perhaps because he had collected zoological and botanical specimens in southern California in the 1850s and again in the 1870s. Emerson quotes from the 5 December 1896 letter from the club to Dr. Cooper informing him of his election to honorary membership: "The club was organized June 22, 1893, as a group of comparatively young workers who feel indebted to yourself and the few remaining veteran ornithologists for the excellent and valuable material which you have prepared in the years past."

James G. Cooper was born in New York and earned his M.D. degree in 1851. After stints in city hospitals, he signed on as surgeon (for \$70 a month!) with the federal government team surveying a route for a railroad from Minnesota to Puget Sound. Both U. S. Grant and Jefferson Davis were in the same unit, and also such pioneer botanists and zoologists as Torrey, Asa Gray, Baird, LeConte, and Suckley. Surgeons in such endeavors were normally



DR. J. G. COOPER

assigned to make meteorological observations, and Cooper developed therefrom a model for study of the relation between climate and forest distribution, which was published by the Smithsonian Institute some 40 years before the broader life-zone concept was promulgated by Merriam. From the birds he and others collected on that expedition came his report published as Chapter I (Land Birds) of Pacific Railroad Reports XII, Book II (1860) as well as many contributions to Chapter II (Water Birds), for which Suckley was listed as author.

In the mid-1850s Cooper carried on protracted field work on his own in the Straits of Juan de Fuca and several parts of western Washington. The fact that his father had been successful enough in business to have "given his time fully to the study of nature" in later years may be pertinent to James Cooper's extended periods of field work long before the days of research grants, but Emerson is silent on how these expeditions were financed.

In 1857, however, Cooper became the surgeon for a wagon road survey from Fort Kearney to Honey Lake (northeast California), but that operation was canceled in the Rocky Mountains, and Cooper continued on his own through the Mojave Desert. Intermittent service as an army surgeon was similarly interspersed with varied subsequent moves and collecting trips—Bollinas and San Francisco to San Diego. In 1871 he and his wife of five years moved to Ventura, California, because of his "failing health," yet his field studies continued there. After a few years they moved back to the Bay Area and lived thereafter at Haywards.

James G. Cooper's publications in conchology were more extensive than those in ornithology, but 26 titles in the

latter field were in Grinnell's annotated list. The major ones subsequent to the 1860 Pacific Railroad report cited above were:

The fauna of Montana Territory [1869]. *Am. Nat.* 2:596-600, 3:31-35, 73-84.

The naturalist in California [1869]. *Am. Nat.* 3:182-189, 470-481.

Land birds [1870, ed. by S. F. Baird from manuscript and notes of J. G. Cooper] xi + 592 p., many figures. *In* Geological survey of California, J. D. Whitney: Ornithology, vol. 1.

The fauna of California and its geographical distribution [1870]. *Proc. Cal. Acad. Sci.* 4:61-81.

On the migration and nesting habits of west-coast birds [1880]. *Proc. U.S. Natl. Mus.* 2:241-251.

Finally a seemingly prophetic note was published just three years before the Cooper Club was established and ten years before the species Cooper wrote about was chosen as the club's emblem and as the name of its journal:

A doomed bird. [1890]. *Zoe* I, Oct., pp. 248-249 [Calif. Condor].

—HOWARD L. COGSWELL, Chairman, History Committee



IS A LIFE MEMBERSHIP A GOOD INVESTMENT ?

The Cooper Society recently reinstated the Life Membership category. Your \$600, paid in 4 installments or one lump sum, adds to our endowment managed by the Investing Trustees. The income generated will support publication of The Condor. Your life membership is an excellent investment in and for the Society: it increases value of the Endowment Fund, thus defraying costs that otherwise must be covered by annual dues. If each member had to pay his or her share of actually running the Society, dues would be more than \$40 per year. By investing in a Life Membership, you facilitate a broad membership, the continued vitality of the Society, and world-wide circulation of our scientific publication.

Since you are also concerned with your personal economics, consider that with the present \$18 annual dues, you would break even with a life membership in 34 years. Of course, dues will increase over the years, greatly shortening the break-even period. For most ornithologists, a life membership will protect you against future dues increases, and during your lifetime will be a bargain.

Gifts and bequests to the Society also are invested. If you wish to make a gift or to mention the Society in your will, feel free to contact any Officer, or C. John Ralph, Endowment Fund-Raising Committee, 7000 Lanphere Road, Arcata, California 95521 (707) 822-3691 or 822-2015.
