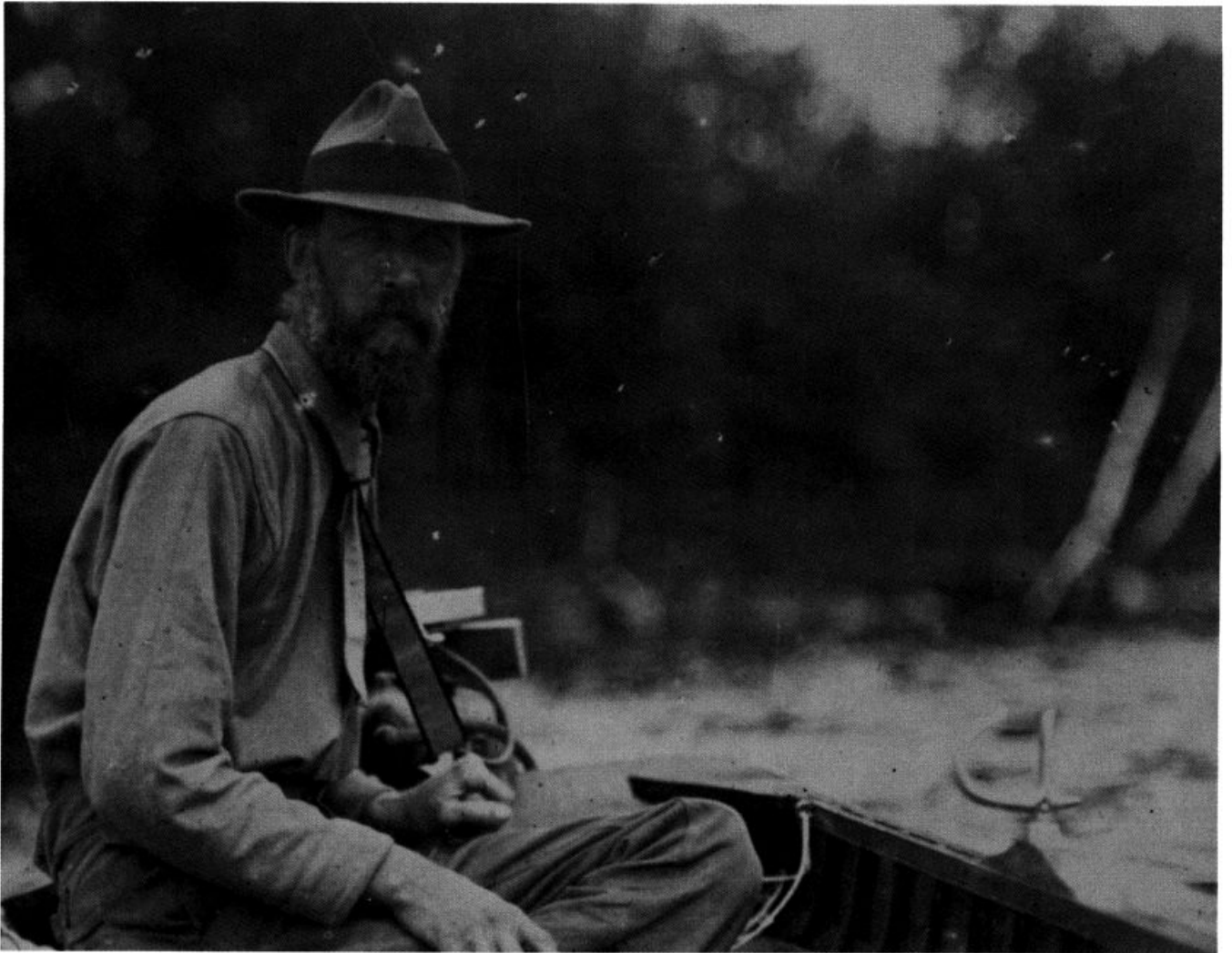


Profile of a pioneer: P. A. TAVERNER

**Canada's first professional ornithologist
still has a tremendous influence on the
study of birds in Canada today.**



P.A. Taverner on Rideau Lake, north of Kingston, Ontario, summer of 1918. Following a doctor's advice, he grew a beard after a severe bout of pneumonia, and never shaved it off. Photo/National Museums of Canada.

Henri Ouellet
National Museums of Canada

ORNITHOLOGY IN CANADA HAS HAD a long history but it was not until the end of the 19th century that it became well structured. It had been a particularly active area of natural history where, for many years, individual naturalists and naturalist groups played a major role in the acquisition and development of knowledge about Canadian birds. During this period, although numerous articles and books on the birds of many regions had been published, and, although naturalists had contributed much on bird distribution in Canada, this information was limited mainly to the southern, inhabited parts of the country near the cities, towns, villages, and to areas easily accessible. No extensive work dealing with the birds of the entire country was then available. In 1909, John and James Macoun, naturalists with the Geological Survey of Canada, published their extensive "Catalogue of Canadian Birds" in which 768 species and subspecies were listed and their status in Canada was defined for the first time.

A few years later, their sustained efforts in surveying the flora and fauna of Canada and the strong support of naturalists across the country made conditions favorable for the creation of the first position of Ornithologist in the Government of Canada. Percy Algernon Taverner thus became the first professional ornithologist in Canada. He was appointed in that capacity in 1911, at the Museum of the Geological Survey, which later became the National Museum of Canada, and later yet, the National Museum of Natural Sciences.

Taverner was born in Guelph, Ontario, on June 10, 1875. His father was the principal of a private school, where his mother also taught. This marriage ended while Taverner was still quite young, and his mother joined Mrs. Morrison's Famous Stock Company, a theatre troupe, in Toronto. At the end of the company's first season, she met and married another actor, Albert Tavernier, who informally adopted Percy. From 1882 on, his parents owned and operated a theatre repertoire company, which imposed a rather nomadic exist-



Members of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club at Point Pelee, Ontario, October 3, 1909. From left to right: J.S. Wallace, B.H. Swales, W.E. Saunders, J.H. Fleming, and P.A. Taverner (seated). Photo/National Museums of Canada.



On board C.S.S. Princess, June 1915, on the North Shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec. From left to right: P.A. Taverner, the ship captain, C.H. Young. Photo/National Museums of Canada.



tence upon the family. This fairly unsettled lifestyle carried him throughout eastern Canada, the eastern United States and down through Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana, during his childhood. Consequently, his places of temporary residence and schooling included Halifax, Nova Scotia, Brooklyn and Highland Falls, New York, Port Huron and Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Almost all of his summers, during his school years, were spent at Lake Muskoka, Ontario, where his parents had an island home. These summers were times of great enrichment for Taverner and periods in which he spent long hours perfecting his taxidermy skills, collecting birds' eggs, studying lizards, frogs, moths, butterflies, and studying the behavior of bird species resident in the area of the island. While yet a young teenager, he became interested in bird photography and pursued this interest with great enthusiasm for much of his life.

Wonderfully versatile, Taverner was skilled in many crafts: drawing, pho-

Taverner with John Macoun. The Macoun brothers, John and James, both naturalists with the Geographical Survey of Canada, published the first comprehensive list of Canada's bird life, "Catalogue of Canadian Birds" in 1909. Photo/National Museums of Canada.



*P.A. Taverner inspecting a Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) nest near Onah, Manitoba, July 6, 1925. Photo/National Museums of Canada.*

tography, carpentry, metal work, wood carving, book binding, gardening, and taxidermy. These skills, coupled with his passion for music and literature and a keen sense of humor, made him generally well-liked and respected.

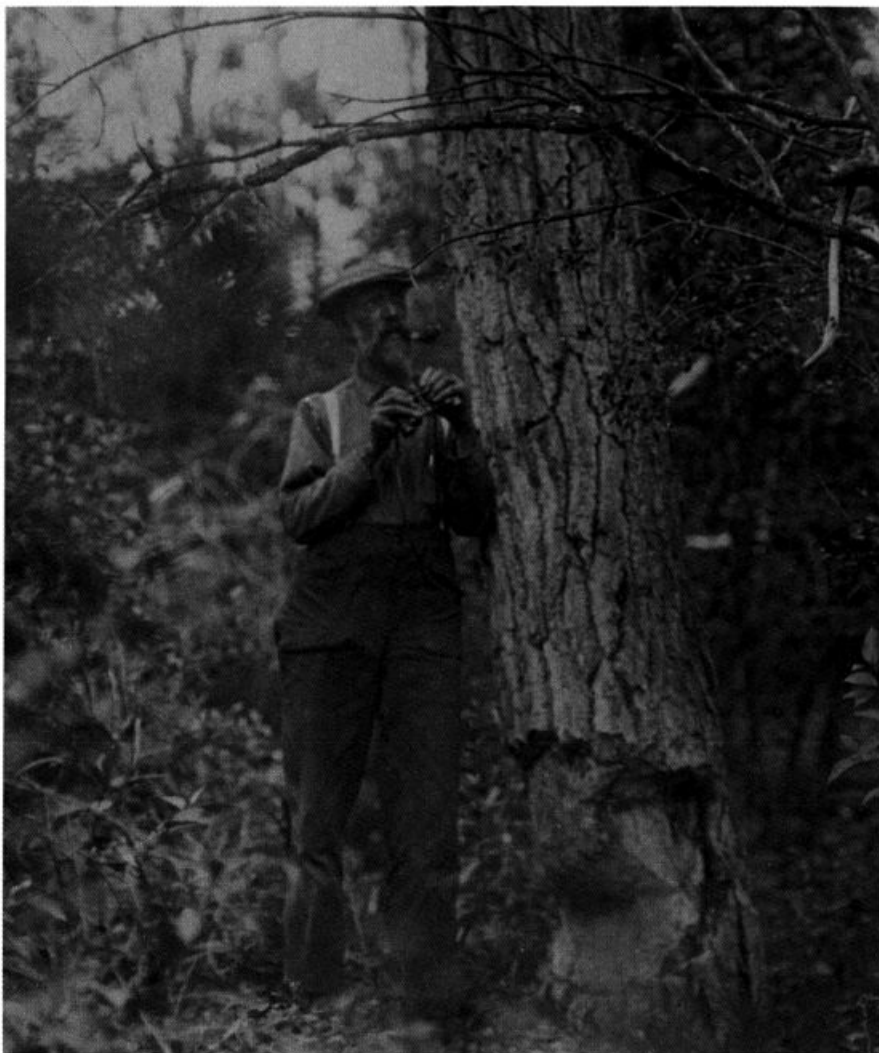
Despite his interest in natural history, Taverner began his professional career as an architect. While studying architecture in Detroit, he became a founding member of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club, which included the great Canadian ornithologist and Taverner's mentor, J.H. Fleming. Between 1905 and 1907, Taverner and other club members spent every possible moment at Point Pelee studying the area's avifauna. At the end of these two years, Taverner and B.H. Swales published an account of the birds of Point Pelee in the *Wilson Bulletin*.

His involvement in ornithology continued to increase. He contributed bird illustrations and line cuts to the Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club and to the book, "Michigan Bird Life" by W.B. Barrow. During this period, he also became interested in bird banding, giving out numbered aluminum bands stamped with a return address (*The Auk*, New York) to friends across the country. This undertaking became too extensive for one person to handle and it was subsequently taken over by the American Bird Banding Association. It should be noted that it was Taverner's idea to create a central banding office for issuing bands and maintaining records.

So, it came as no surprise when Taverner was appointed to the post of ornithologist at the Museum in 1911.

Until his retirement in 1942, P.A. Taverner, as he signed his publications, authored nearly 300 articles and books. The topics he treated cover many aspects of ornithology such as distribution in Canada, systematics, taxonomy, nomenclature, vernacular names, migration, banding, conservation, economic aspects, effects of poisons on birds (pesticides), behaviour, etc., and numerous book reviews.

His first book *Birds of Eastern Canada* appeared in 1919, with a French edition *Les Oiseaux de l'Est du Canada* in 1922. *Birds of Western Canada* was published in 1926, and his comprehensive *Birds of Canada* in 1938. These books provide detailed descriptions of the species found in Canada, with abundant information on field marks, specifics about nesting, a distribution



P.A. Taverner in the field, near Rumsey, Alberta, summer of 1925. Photo/National Museums of Canada.



Taverner in the field in Manitoba photographing a Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) nest. Photo/National Museums of Canada.



Common Murres (Uria aalge) and Atlantic Puffins (Fratercula arctica), with Northern Gannets (Sula bassanus) in the background, on Bonaventure Island, Quebec, June 1915. Photo/P.A. Taverner, courtesy National Museums of Canada



Photography and illustration were two skills that enhanced Taverner's work in the field. This drawing of a downy young Horned Grebe (Podiceps auritus), showing the fleshy comb-like process, was drawn from a color sketch of a fresh bird.

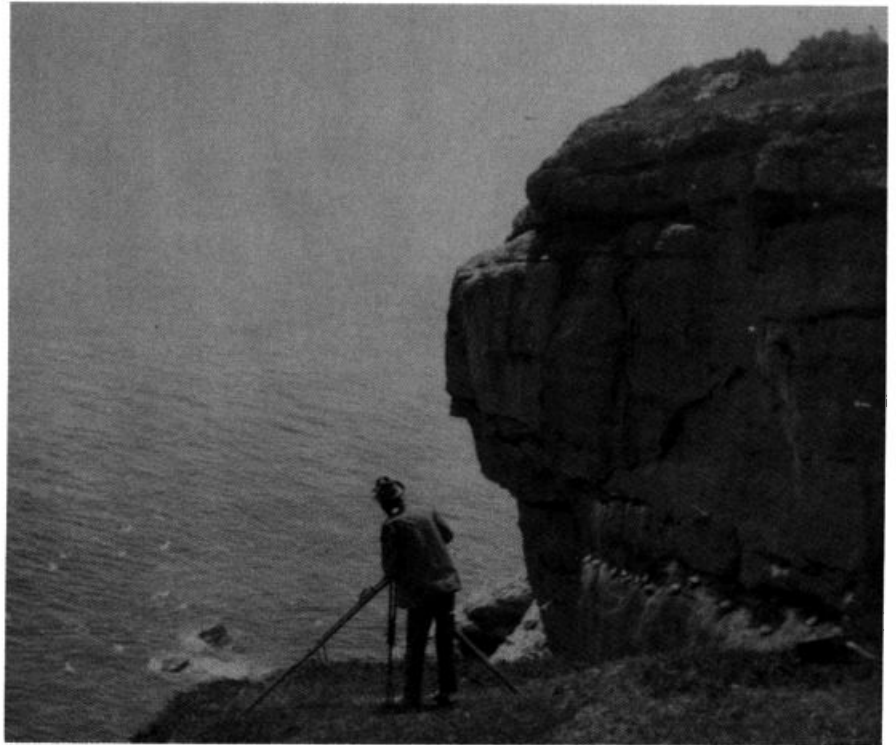
summary, and occasionally, general natural history comments or remarks on the economic aspects of the species treated. They were abundantly illustrated with black-and-white drawings by himself and colour plates, mostly by Allan Brooks, who had gained an international reputation as a nature and bird artist. Books of this nature contributed greatly to popularize ornithology in Canada owing to the high quality of the information they contained and because of the attractive format in which the information was presented to the reader. This was at a time when there was little general interest in birds.

Taverner conducted a dynamic survey programme to record as accurately as possible bird distribution in all parts of Canada and to define the status of each species recorded in the country. To do so he planned field work, provided contracts for field surveys, and established an important network of corre-

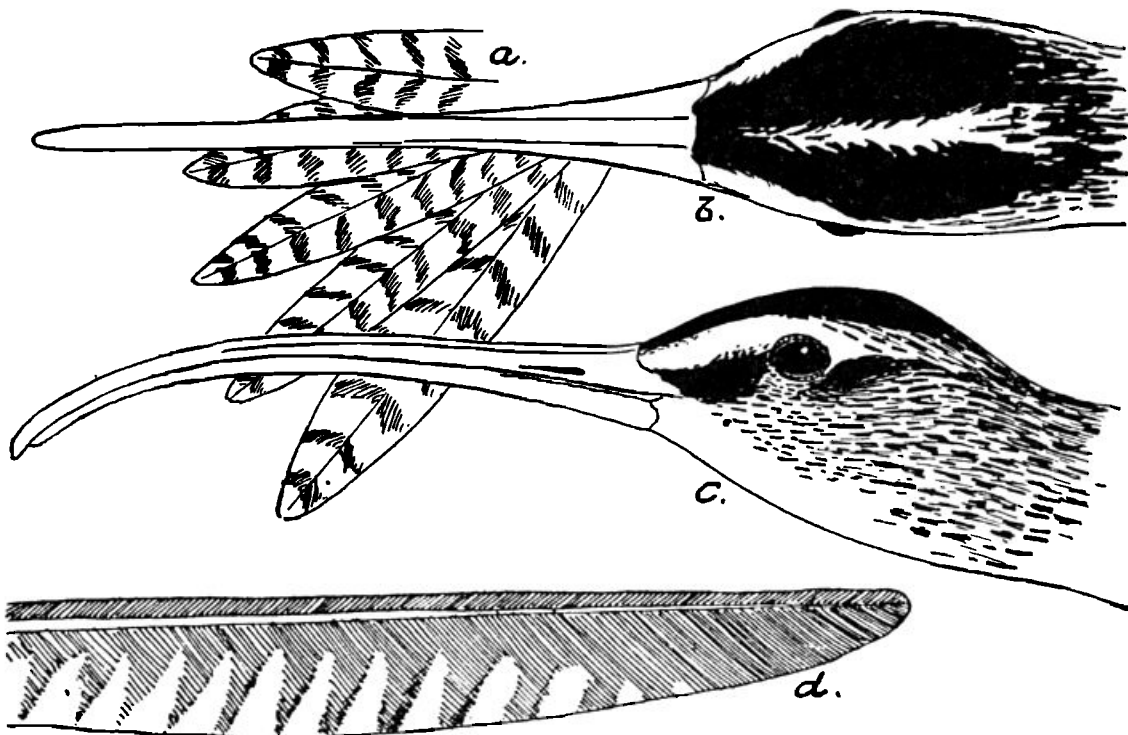
spondents who provided him with new information on birds from all parts of Canada. In order to record these data, he conceived a unique system of maps and index reference cards from which distribution information could be obtained rapidly and accurately. The system has been maintained and updated by his successors and is still in use.

As a curator, he expanded the national ornithological collection of about 4000 specimens for which he was responsible in 1911, to more than 30,000 upon his retirement. As early as 1912, he wrote a small booklet on specimen preparation which was given to all field parties of the Geological Survey of Canada and available to the general public. This booklet was later expanded and incorporated into a more comprehensive work on vertebrate preservation for research collections published by the National Museum.

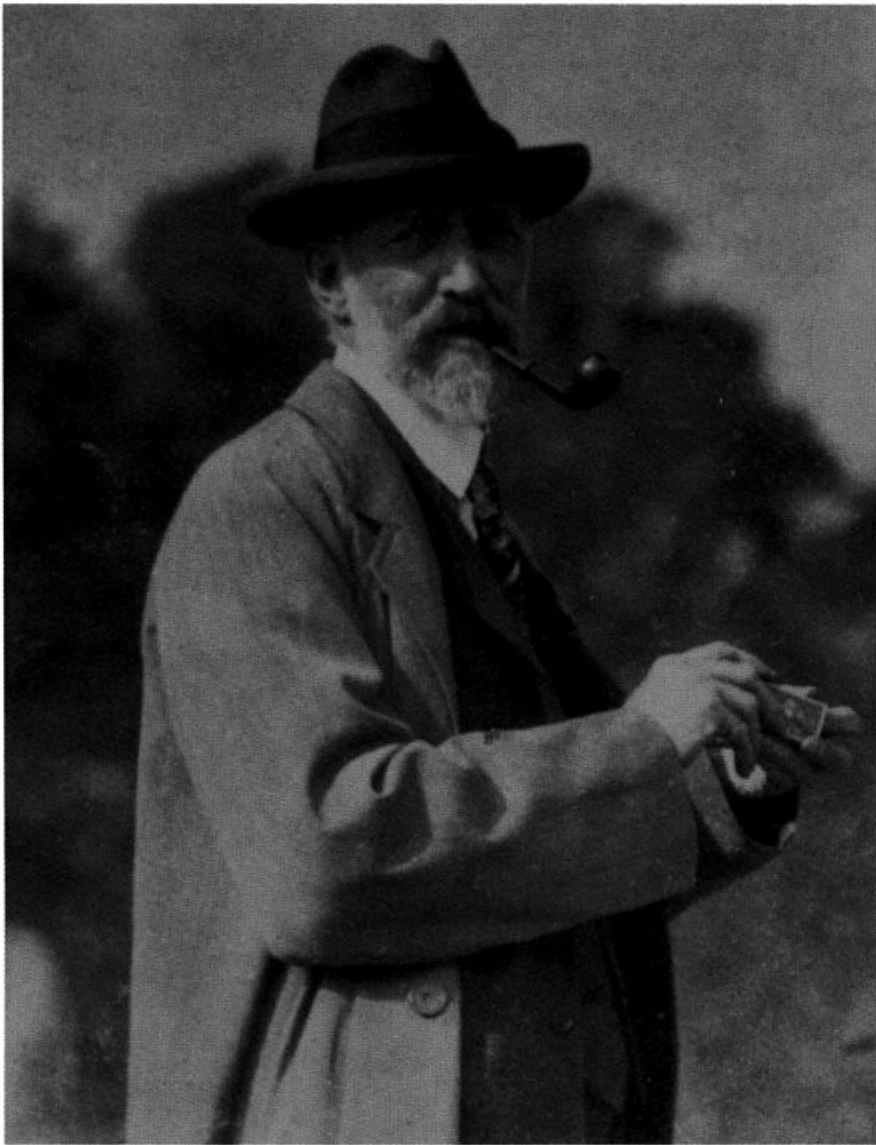
In 1913 and 1914, Taverner made films of the bird cliffs of Perce and Bonaventure islands showing gannets and other sea birds. He also filmed wild geese



P.A. Taverner photographing Alcidae on Bonaventure Island, Quebec, June 1915. Photo/National Museums of Canada.



Taverner's drawing of a Whimbrel (formerly Hudsonian Curlew, Numenius phaeopus) shows specific details: a) barred axillars, b) median crown stripe, c) profile of head and d) tooth-marked first primary.



One of the last photos of Taverner circa 1946. Photo/National Museums of Canada.

at the Miner Bird Sanctuary. These films were still being shown thirty years later.

His concern for bird conservation was profound and he became instrumental in the establishment of Point Pelee as a national park and in the creation of several bird sanctuaries. He was greatly interested as well in the economic aspects of birds. For example, he studied the Double-crested Cormorant in minute detail when this bird was under intense pressure from the fishing industry. Taverner was also active in the conservation of raptors which, until appropriate legislation became effective, were shot on sight throughout Canada.

His influence on Canadian ornithology was immense and he assumed this responsibility brilliantly in encouraging naturalists and other ornithologists. He provided them with sound advice and always displayed remarkable foresight in his recommendations and comments on their work and research.

In summary, P.A. Taverner was undoubtedly the leading and most influential Canadian ornithologist during the first half of the 20th century in spite of the fact that, as W.L. McAtee wrote about him, "he was far ahead of the facilities available to him."

He died in Ottawa on May 9, 1947.

—Curator, Ornithology Section,
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