

John Farrand, Jr. MOMENTS IN HISTORY

The Pileolated Warbler

Old-timers remember the name "Pileolated Warbler," once used for the richly colored western and north-western subspecies of Wilson's Warbler. In a bygone and more relaxed era, traveling birders counted both Wilson's and the Pileolated on their year's lists and lifelists. The Pileolated Warbler, although it is just a form of Wilson's, has a long and distinguished history. Its discovery and description involved a veteran English sea captain, an illustrious German zoologist, and a Russian empress. Were it not for one small technicality, we might today call the whole species the Pileolated Warbler.

The story begins in eighteenth-century Russia, with Catherine II. Born Princess Sophie Fredericka Augusta of Anhalt-Zerbst, she was fluent in German, French, and Latin, and quickly added Russian when she traveled east, changed her name to Catherine Alexeyevna, converted to the Russian Orthodox faith, and married the heir to the Romanov throne. She was crowned Empress and Czarina of Russia in 1762, following the swift overthrow of her husband, Czar Peter III.

Catherine II, or Catherine the Great, quickly impressed other European rulers by the skill with which she pursued Russian interests in the endless chess game of diplomacy and warfare. She wrested the Crimea from the Ottoman Turks, signed a treaty with Prussia and Austria by which Poland was methodically par-

tioned, and several times succeeded in playing one great European power against another, usually to Russia's advantage.

Catherine launched a period of modernization almost unparalleled in the history of Imperial Russia. She founded the Hermitage, Russia's finest art museum, and personally stocked it with Raphaels, Rembrandts, Titians, and Van Dykes. She exchanged letters with the literary notables of Europe, among them Voltaire, who showered her with complimentary epithets such as *l'Incomparable* and *l'Astre le plus brillant du Nord* ("the Brightest Star of the North"), and Diderot, the famous French encyclopedist, who came to St. Petersburg for an extended stay. Her purpose in all this was to bring as much Western culture to Russia as possible.

Her Majesty was equally interested in Western science. At her invitation, many of Europe's top mathematicians, physicists, and naturalists visited the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The greatest of these, and the one with whom she had the most enthusiastic relations, was Peter Simon Pallas, a German zoologist, botanist, and geologist who had traveled to England when he was 20 years old and had shown such promise there that he was elected to the Royal Society at the age of 23. Catherine made him a professor at the Imperial Academy in 1768, when he was 27, and promptly sent him on a six-

year expedition that took him to nearly every corner of Russia and Siberia.

When Pallas returned and began studying the specimens he had brought back, the Empress gave him an estate in the Crimea and an endowment of ten thousand rubles. She also purchased his entire collection, but told him he could keep it for life. Pallas published the results of his great journey in the three-volume *Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des russischen Reichs*, which contained, among other things, the first descriptions of the Red-crested Pochard, Mongolian Plover, Rufous-necked Stint, Little Gull, Pallas' Sandgrouse, Siberian Rubythroat, Siberian Accentor, Little Bunting, Rustic Bunting, and Yellow-breasted Bunting.

Meanwhile, Russia was expanding her activities in Alaska. Explorers in the employ of Russia had first reached Alaska in 1741, when Vitus Bering and Georg Wilhelm Steller landed on the southeast coast near Mount St. Elias. By the 1780s there was a thriving fur trade. In 1784 Grigor Shelikov founded the first permanent Russian settlement in Alaska, at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island, and petitioned the Empress for a state monopoly on the Alaska fur trade. Catherine referred the matter to her Commerce Commission, who recommended that Shelikov be granted his monopoly. But Her Majesty refused. Alaska was too far away to defend easily, and other countries, among them the fledgling United States, were also interested in Alaska. An official monopoly would have opened a second diplomatic chess game in the East, something the Empress wished to avoid. So Shelikov got a medal, but no monopoly.

In making this decision, Catherine the Great showed her skill in the art of conducting affairs of state. Although a state monopoly was eventually granted in 1799, after Catherine's death, Alaska was indeed too far away. In 1867, during the reign of

her great-grandson Alexander II, Russia finally sold Alaska to the United States for \$7.2 million.

Nevertheless, the Empress was keenly interested in Alaska. When reports reached her of cruelty to native Alaskans, she issued two decrees, one forbidding mistreatment of her loyal native subjects in Alaska, and another inviting Alaskans to report any instance of brutality to her officials so that offenders could be punished. She also took a more covert step. In 1785, she commissioned Joseph Billings, an English seaman who had sailed on Captain Cook's final voyage, to make a journey to Russian America. Given the rank of Captain-Lieutenant, he was supposed to determine the exact positions of the various islands off Alaska. But his real purpose seems to have been to investigate these charges of cruelty to native Alaskans.

Thus it was that after a long and arduous trip to the east, Billings reached Three Saints Bay on June 30, 1790. When he sailed out of the harbor six days later, he took with him a report about treatment of the Alaskans that was not going to please Her Majesty. He also carried some natural history specimens, including a small, yellow-breasted bird with a black cap.

When Billings made it back to St. Petersburg in 1794, his specimens were given to Pallas, who realized the bird with the black cap was an undescribed species. Then in his fifties, Pallas was at work on his most ambitious treatise, the three-volume *Zoogeographia Rosso-Asiatica*, in which he planned to describe all the animals found in Russian Asia and Alaska. Of Billings' bird from Kodiak Island, he wrote that it was the size of a Goldcrest. His description is meticulous, with detailed measurements and careful notes on the plumage, including the black cap. He named the new bird *Motacilla pileolata*—from Latin

pileum, a skullcap. This was the bird that would one day be called the Pileolated Warbler.

Faced with describing the fauna of this huge and varied region, much of which he had visited in the 1770s, Pallas labored on and on. The Empress, his steadfast patron, died in 1796 at the age of 67, and still the *Zoogeographia* was not published. When Pallas' wife died in 1810, he



returned to Germany, but still no volume of his treatise had come out. When he himself died on September 8, 1811, none of the *Zoogeographia* had been published, but later in the year the Imperial Academy printed the first two volumes. Volume I contained Pallas' description of *Motacilla pileolata*.

That was in 1811, and therein lies the small technicality. Pallas had possessed the Kodiak Island specimen for 17 years, and more than two decades had passed since Billings had obtained it. But half a world away, in Philadelphia, Alexander Wilson found what he called the "Green Black-capped Flycatcher" (now Wilson's Warbler), and formally named it *Muscicapa pusilla* (now *Wilsonia pusilla*) in Volume III of his *American Ornithology*. That too was in 1811.

The two names were published in

the same year and applied to the same species. Which one stands? The preface to Volume III of Wilson's *American Ornithology* is dated February 12, but the description by Pallas appeared much later, after his death in September. Wilson, although he discovered the bird long after Pallas realized it was something new, was thus the first to put his description in print. According to the rules of the game, Wilson's name wins.

Had there been a handy journal like *The Auk* or *The Wilson Bulletin* in those days, Pallas would probably have published his description first, and we might know the bird today as the Pileolated Warbler. When English names for subspecies were dropped in 1957, it might have been "Wilson's Warbler" that disappeared from our vocabulary.

But we needn't worry about Pallas being forgotten. He was an energetic describer of new species, remembered today in the names of Pallas' Sea-Eagle, Pallas' Sandgrouse, Pallas' Grasshopper-Warbler, Pallas' Warbler, Pallas' Reed-Bunting, Pallas' Rosefinch, and the extinct Pallas' Cormorant.

Even among the birds of North America, a continent he never visited, Pallas was the first describer of several species, including the Pelagic Cormorant, Steller's Eider, Steller's Sea-Eagle, Sanderling, Caspian Tern, Pigeon Guillemot, Cassin's Auklet, Parakeet Auklet, Least Auklet, Crested Auklet, Rhinoceros Auklet, Tufted Puffin, Hermit Thrush, and Rosy Finch.

In giving Peter Simon Pallas so much to do and rewarding him so richly, Catherine the Great showed her usual good judgment. Describing the fauna of the vast Russian Empire was an extraordinary task, requiring an extraordinary person. In Pallas, she undoubtedly found the right man for the job. 