



In Memoriam: Gale Wendell Monson, 1912–2012

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Source: The Auk, 130(4) : 810-811

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2013.130.4.810>

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The Auk 130(4):810–811, 2013

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Printed in USA.

IN MEMORIAM: GALE WENDELL MONSON, 1912–2012

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Gale Wendell Monson was born in Munich in northeastern North Dakota on 1 August 1912. He died in the company of family members in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 19 February 2012, just 164 days short of his 100th birthday. Gale's ashes were scattered in Catalina State Park in Tucson, Arizona, near a bench that he had placed there in remembrance of his late wife, Sally Myer Monson. Gale was honored as an Elected Member of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1950, and he belonged to the Cooper and Wilson ornithological societies and eight other scientific, conservation, and wildlife organizations. He received the American Motors Conservation Award in 1959; the U.S. Department of the Interior Distinguished Service Award in 1970; and the New Mexico–Arizona Section of The Wildlife Society's Olé Timer Award in 1976, the same year he was elected a Fellow of the Arizona–Nevada Academy of Science.

Gale grew up on his family's wheat farm in the Red River Valley of North Dakota, where he developed a deep interest in nature and considerable knowledge of the wild birds, other fauna, and flora of southeastern North Dakota. His awareness of the natural world dawned suddenly in the summer of 1923. By January 1925, he had embarked upon an eight-year study of the local birdlife. In the previous year Gale had begun the habit of writing his biological and related findings in personal journals, to which he continued making additions into his 92nd year. This informative and otherwise impressive set of documents is now housed and available for study in the special collections at the University of Arizona libraries.

Gale was still working on his Cass County, North Dakota, bird study when he enrolled in North Dakota State College (now University) in Fargo, from which he graduated in 1934. Gale later gratefully acknowledged the guidance of Professor E. A. Stevens there, who helped him as he compiled, analyzed, and wrote up those findings for what was soon published as his first scientific paper. The publication's annotated list is notable for its 187 species and subspecies of birds, but the later identifications were solely based on names that he had obtained from the literature. Some five years hence, Gale would learn that such subspecific determinations are best made through the careful study of the relevant specimens!

After graduating with a degree in biology, Gale was hired by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to conduct a "grazing reconnaissance" on the Papago (now Tohono O'odham) Reservation in southwestern Arizona. There he recorded 120 avian species and subspecies, 12 of which he regarded as "uncommon enough to be of special interest" and thus worthy of further discussion in a separate annotated listing. Gale worked as a biologist with the Soil Conservation Service in Safford, Arizona, in 1935–1936. From there, Gale supervised wildlife work at 24 Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and made surveys in

the Gila Basin of southeastern Arizona and adjacent southwestern New Mexico. In May 1935, he reported observing Arizona's first Great-tailed Grackles, which were almost certainly members of the subspecies that Allan R. Phillips would later name *Cassidix* [= *Quiscalus*] *mexicanus monsoni* in Gale's honor.

Gale first met the younger but even more ornithologically precocious Allan Phillips in May 1939. This event marked the beginning of a close collaboration, especially on Arizona birds, that endured between the two men until Phillips died in 1996. Following their discussions at that initial meeting, Gale finally began to understand the subspecies concept as it was then and subsequently applied to birds by one of its most exacting and enduring adherents. For example, Phillips long stressed his view that avian subspecies must first and foremost be properly identified, following which process those findings could then be used for broader biological purposes (e.g., the study of avian dispersal, range shifts, and migration). In addition, it was the young Phillips who taught Gale how to collect, prepare, and catalog birds as museum specimens. In time, Gale entered a total of 574 avian specimens in his personal catalog (plus he donated 10 additional specimens to other collectors), of which we have tracked down 396 that are now housed in the University of Arizona, with an additional 85 in the Smithsonian Institution, and 18 in five other collections.

In 1936–1939, Gale worked for the Navajo Service conducting wildlife surveys on the Navajo and Hopi reservations of southeastern Utah, northeastern Arizona, and northwestern New Mexico. In 1939, he returned to the Soil Conservation Service to plan surveys of public and private lands in Arizona. Gale began his long career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in December 1940 at Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he was involved with planning the Bosque del Apache and Bitter Lake national wildlife refuges. In 1941, Gale married Sarah (Sally) Elizabeth Myer of Tucson and began serving the first of two separate tours of duty in the U.S. Army during and just after World War II. The second tour was spent in southeast Asia, where he was awarded the Bronze Star. After his military service ended, Gale returned to work for the USFWS and managed several refuges in southwestern Arizona and adjacent California between 1946 and 1962. Following that period, he took a position with the same agency as a member of its Division of Wildlife Refuges in Washington, D.C.

Gale retired from the USFWS while still living in the D.C. area in 1969. In 1971, he and Sally returned to Tucson, where he worked as the resident supervisor of the Arizona–Sonoran Desert Museum until 1974, and then as its weekend supervisor until July 1977. Sally died in that city in 1995, after she and Gale had been married 54 years. During that span, they had raised a son, Fred, and daughters Rosemary, Margaret, Anne, and Ruth. Six years

later, Gale moved to Albuquerque to be near Anne and Ruth and their families.

Gale Monson pursued his many and broad interests in nature in several regions of North America, including by gathering field data on wild plants, animals, and their habitats across a broad swath of the continent extending from North Dakota southward to Sonora and Chihuahua, and from California east to Maine and Virginia. However, his main biological focus had obviously long been on the biota (and especially the birdlife) of Arizona, the adjacent states of the Southwest, and northwestern Mexico. Gale's varied ornithological pursuits ranged from recreational birding and educational bird walks to censusing (e.g., he conducted 32 Christmas Bird Counts in Arizona over the years), banding operations, the judicious collecting and preparation of specimens as noted above, and studying the life history, ecology, and status of avian taxa, populations, and faunas.

According to our compilation of Gale's biological and related bibliography, he amassed 67 such contributions—which

range from a series of shorter notes in various scientific and semi-popular outlets to his co-authorship of two books on the birds of Arizona, another on the avifauna of Sonora, and one on the desert bighorn. While 59 of these publications dealt primarily with ornithology, among the others Gale also co-authored the latter work on mammals along with two papers on southwestern rodents. In addition, he authored one on the annual phenology of the flora and fauna around Springfield, Virginia, plus a memorial for his first biological mentor, Professor Stevens in North Dakota. Gale also wrote a weekly column entitled "Sun Country Outdoors" for the *Yuma (Arizona) Daily Sun* from October 1958 to June 1962; compiled and composed numerous seasonal bird accounts as editor for the Southwest Region of *Audubon Field Notes* (1948–1961, 1963–1964) and *American Birds* (1972–1973); and served as editor of the *Atlantic Naturalist* in 1969.

We thank Anne Monson, Ruth Monson Bear, and the many friends who knew and cared so deeply about this remarkable man for providing much of the information in this memorial.