

100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union

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100 YEARS AGO IN THE AOU

100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union

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I was honored to be asked to carry on the tradition of “100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists’ Union” for Dr. Kimberly G. Smith, who passed away suddenly on April 9. Kim was my mentor for my postgraduate degrees, a dear friend, and a close colleague. He instilled in me a curiosity, love, and respect for the history of my professions in ecology and ornithology. He taught me a great deal about our academic ancestors, and to treat each individual, past and present, with humor and generosity. He also taught me to take out each extraneous “the” from a manuscript. As his academic daughter, I hope Kim will continue to be seen through my words.

Ninety-eight General Notes were published in *The Auk* in 1918. Sixty-two percent were reports associated with distribution and migration. Reports from east of the Mississippi dominated (43), but reports were also coming more often from the western states (14) and Canada (4). Seven and 12 notes concerned systematics and breeding records, respectively. Notes on behavior (10), including descriptions of song (1), had become more common, as were reports on conservation (4). Three reports were made on physiology, including one by Waldo M. McAtee (1883–1962), known for his work in economic ornithology and vertebrate diets. His note on physiology explained the cause of fishy flavor in wild duck meat (*The Auk* 35:476). There was a single historical note, by T.S. (“Tomb Stone”) Palmer (35:240).

Harry Church Oberholser (1870–1963) was tops in General Notes with 15 reports. In addition to those were his publications on systematics and his continued series of “Notes on North American Birds” and “Annual List of Proposed Changes to the AOU Check-list of North American Birds.” Oberholser was also mentioned in the General Notes of others, in Recent Literature, and in the Notes and News sections. He was exceptionally prolific—and, according to his memorial, something of a character. He worked with C. Hart Merriam (1855–1942) and Robert Ridgway (1850–1929) through his employment with the Bureau of Biological Survey and his association with the U.S. National Museum. Ridgway was one of the greatest taxonomists in ornithological history, and Merriam was an

authority on biogeography. Likely owing to these associations and his character, Oberholser became a highly productive taxonomist. He was known for his acute memory and attention to detail and for “splitting” species into subspecies based upon seemingly minute geographic variation in plumage and morphology. Throughout his lifetime Oberholser named 11 families and subfamilies, 99 genera and subgenera, and 560 species and subspecies. His publications numbered 900, and though taxonomy and systematics were primary subjects, other topics, such as migration and conservation, were included in his communications (Aldrich 1968). His memorial, written by John W. Aldrich (1906–1955), explains his productivity: “Strict personal discipline, thriftiness, perseverance, and attention to details were among his characteristics. He worked steadily and for long hours, including holidays and weekends, in the National Museum on his ornithological investigations.” According to Aldrich, Oberholser also expected such productivity of his subordinates:

At times Oberholser was severe, unbending, and demanding of his subordinates, although always gracious to those whom he held in high esteem. He would not permit his employees to smoke in the office, and he always impressed them with the need for maximum production. He once figured anticipated production based on the number of seconds per unit of specimen labeling, and employees returning from lunch were warned that the length of their absence was being observed by the telltale snap of Oberholser’s watch case. Field men working for Oberholser were advised that nothing less than 10 specimens collected per day would be an acceptable production.

Though Oberholser received both accolades and criticism for his taxonomic work, Aldrich notes that the minutiae that Oberholser discovered and recorded would likely become important to the study of populations and the processes of microevolution and macroevolution. At the conclusion of the memorial, Aldrich states:

I believe the time will come when a practical and generally accepted system of nomenclature will be devised to fit all populations representative of differing stages of speciation. On that happy day, the fine distinctions indicated by “HCO” on specimen labels will have new significance.

On the subject of distribution, three reports concerned irruptive movements of Boreal Chickadees (*Poecile hudsonicus*) in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Two noted sightings of pairs in the breeding season behaving suspiciously as if nesting, though the authors could not locate nests (35:230–231). The European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) invasion was continuing in earnest. Reports came from Alabama, Georgia, Maine, New York, and Massachusetts, and the most interesting of these provided guidance for potential starling control measures (35:80). Sixteen starlings had been trapped in a chimney and released one by one when the owners came to visit. On inspection, they found over a hundred dead starlings. Out of kindness, they covered the flue with wire to prevent future tragedy. Thomas E. Penard (1878–1936), author of the note, suggested that a future starling trap be made along the same lines as the well-described chimney “when it shall become necessary to deal more strenuously with these annoying pests.”

An interesting series of notes provided a story involving the erroneous addition of Harpy Eagle (*Harpia harpyja*) to the Colorado Bird List. William H. Bergtold (1865–1936) had seen the following in *The Auk* (34:453–455) under the heading “Remarks on Colorado Birds,” by British ornithologist Willoughby P. Lowe (1872–1949):

Thrasatus harpyia. HARPY EAGLE.—This is only an accidental visitor to Colorado. One was shot by Geo. Cress of Lees, Pueblo Co., some years ago and preserved by Doertenbach of Pueblo, who informed me upon inquiries that there was no doubt as to its identification. A short notice mentioning its capture appeared in the “Field and Farm” newspaper of Denver.

Bergtold began his note: “An interesting example of the great care necessary in placing occurrences of rare species on permanent record, is contained in ‘The Auk’ for October, 1917.” He explained that the newspaper article was published 14 years earlier. He had made every effort to substantiate the identification with Captain Doertenbach, but after the following reply, he had heard nothing since.

The Eagle of which you saw a note in the papers some time ago is still in my possession. Its identification was by myself but I only have

Coues Key to North American Birds and as it is quite old it may be somewhat faulty. We are still working at the identification of the specimen and if it should prove to be a harpy eagle I will give you all the necessary data when I make my report to the Society. . . .”

Very respectfully yours,
(signed) W. F. Doertenbach.

Bergtold believed the record “dubious, and clouded by uncertainty” (35:77–78). The note directly following was by Frederick C. Lincoln (1892–1960), at the time curator of birds at the Colorado Museum of Natural History and later a leading ornithologist and organizer of the bird-banding division of the U.S. Biological Survey. Lincoln immediately contacted Doertenbach, whose reply shows that he was in doubt after all. Lincoln graciously resolved the issue, finding the supposed Harpy Eagle to be an immature Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).

Concerning systematics, of interest is John Treadwell Nichols’s report (35:82) in which he weighed in on Walter Faxon’s report from 1916 (34:481–482). Faxon (1848–1920) reiterated observations included in his earlier publication (Faxon 1913) proving definitively that “Brewster’s Warblers” were hybrids of Blue-winged and Golden-winged warblers (*Vermivora cyanoptera* and *V. chrysoptera*) and added further observations through 1917. He lacked observations of pairings of Brewster’s Warblers to one another; now we know how rare this pairing is likely to be (see Parkes 1951). Nichols (1883–1958) had published an astute hypothesis in 1908 explaining plumage characteristics and abundance of Brewster’s and Lawrence’s warblers via a simple Mendelian model of inheritance (25:86). His response to Faxon’s report clarified the role of Mendelian genetics in production of hybrids and suggested shooting Blue and Golden-winged warblers so that two Brewster’s would be more likely to pair,

an heroic measure perhaps, but doubtless more specimens are frequently taken with less return to science. To interfere with [the Blue-winged Warbler] would be unwise, as the sporadic occurrence of that species in the golden-wing’s range places it in the position of the goose that layed the golden eggs.

A note (35:238–240) by Walter A. Goeltz (1897–1961) seems particularly relevant given the state of birds in prairies of North America (North American Bird Conservation Initiative Canada 2012, North American Bird Conservation Initiative 2016) and current knowledge of drivers of decline based on agricultural operations he observed (Tews et al. 2013). Goeltz worked on a grain

farm in Saskatchewan in 1917, observed conversion of prairie to agriculture, and remarked on the toll taken on nesting birds. Among his many observations are the following:

I remember twice that the horses had walked over brooding ducks which did not fly up until the disks were about to roll over them. In a case of this sort and also when the birds are not setting, it is practically impossible to see the nests in time to save them. . . . Marsh Hawks and Short-eared Owls are fellow sufferers with the ducks. . . . All four hawk nests which I found were built in stubble fields and were broken up by farming operations. Five owl nests were located; three of these were spoiled, but the other two were collected before something else could happen to them. Of the 35 duck, hawk, and owl nests which I examined I know of only five in which the eggs hatched.

One cannot help but ponder what Goelitz would think of the loss of North American prairies and their

populations of birds, for which he had such interest and concern, more than a century since his observations.

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