

Witmer Stone: The Fascination of Nature

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Source: The Auk, 132(4) : 955-957

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-15-60.1>

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BOOK REVIEW

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Published September 30, 2015

Witmer Stone: The Fascination of Nature by Scott McConnell. 2014. Self-published. xii + 411 pages, 16 black-and-white photographs, 2 drawings. \$25 (flexbound). ISBN 978-0-692229-38-5 (Figure 1).

Witmer Stone is a masterful, scholarly biography, the overdue first of a naturalist (1866–1939) deserving of more recognition (Huber 1940, Rehn 1941). This thoroughly researched book engagingly documents Stone's legacy as an ornithological historian, his work with numerous organizations, his many writings and voluminous correspondence, and his contributions to natural history.

Stone worked at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP) for 51 years (1888–1939; director 1925–1928), performing important and restorative curatorial work on collections that had been largely neglected since the time of John Cassin (1813–1869). Stone's contributions to ornithology and to the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) in its early years were significant. He was elected a fellow of the AOU in 1892 and served as council member (1898–1939), vice president (1914–1920), president (1920–1923), and editor of *The Auk* (1912–1936). Additionally, he served as chair of the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North American Birds (committee member c. 1919–1931) and the Committee on Bird Protection (1896–1901). Stone was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and member/commissioner of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature. He was a founder and president (1929–1931) of the American Society of Mammalogists, a founder of the Philadelphia Botanical Club and of the august Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, president of the Pennsylvania Audubon Society, and director of the Zoological Society of Philadelphia. The University of Pennsylvania awarded him an Honorary Sc.D. in 1913.

In view of these activities, one might wonder whether Stone was self-aggrandizing and overly ambitious. To the contrary, McConnell's book shows that Stone was universally and affectionately regarded as a modest, self-effacing, generous, tolerant, kind, and witty individual imbued with a Herculean work ethic (one that severely affected his health in the 1930s) while always maintaining a genial twinkle in his eye. Although involved with many

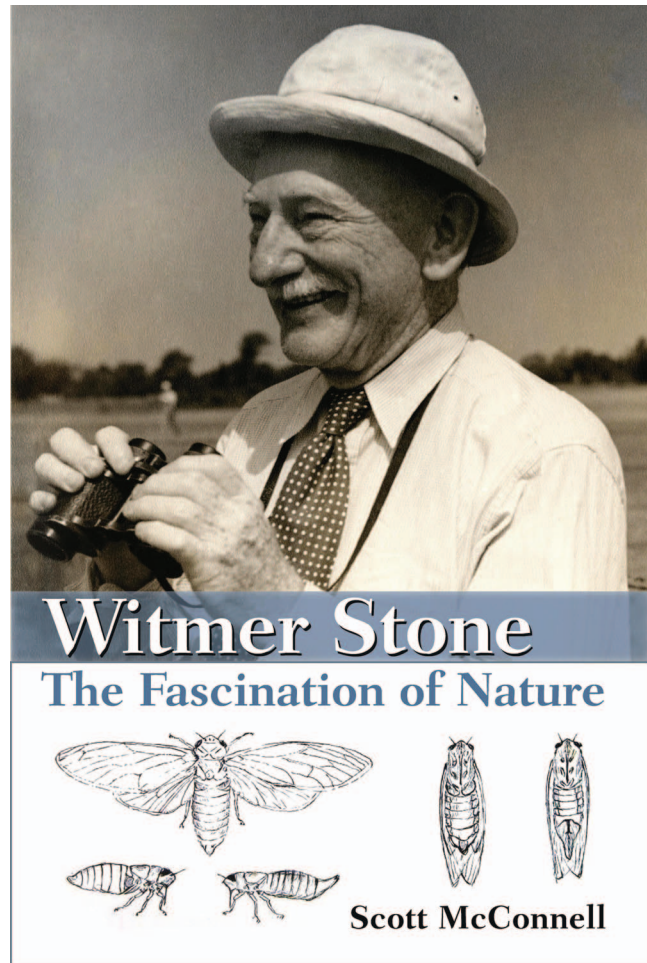


FIGURE 1. *Witmer Stone: The Fascination of Nature* by Scott McConnell.

issues of his day, including the creation of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and the prohibitions on feather collecting for the millinery trade and on hawk shooting at Cape May, Stone's conciliatory nature often was not temperamentally suited for such struggles. Indeed, we learn that he was sometimes too lenient with submissions to *The Auk* and often shied away from full engagement with conservation issues. Nevertheless, McConnell also points out that Stone could be incisive and critical when necessary.

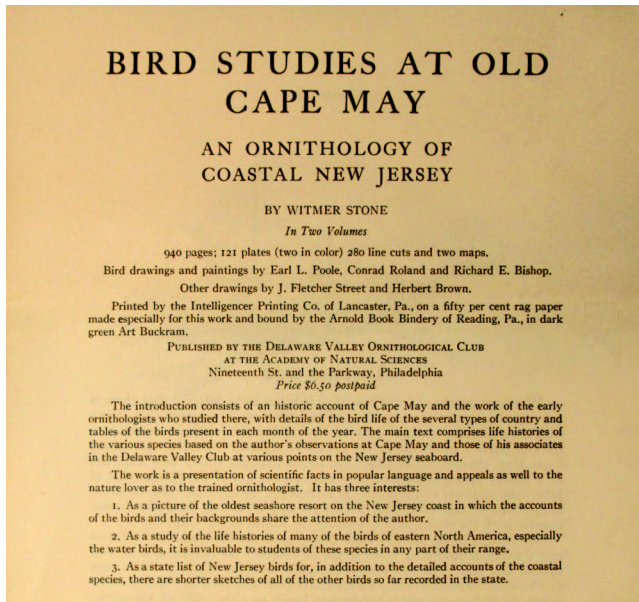


FIGURE 2. Flyer for *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*.

A man of modest means (in contrast to some “dollar-a-year” men who later worked at the ANSP), Stone was an accomplished general naturalist with deep interests in botany (Stone 1911), insects, spiders, mammals, avian taxonomy and the molt process, and, to some extent, reptiles and fish. He published hundreds of articles, literature reviews, and notes on birds, various articles on mammals, several on spiders and reptiles, numerous obituaries, and gave scores of presentations to scientists and the laity. McConnell relates how, after a leave of absence from the ANSP in the summer of 1919, Stone—an active collector and congenitally averse to goofing off—brought back to the museum 202 birds, 6 sets of eggs, 75 amphibians and reptiles, some fish, 4,000 insects, 25 trays of shells, and 1,002 sheets of plants from Arizona and the Gulf of Mexico. Not a great traveler, he nevertheless curated collections from Borneo, Ecuador, Honduras, Belgian Congo, Kenya, and elsewhere.

Perhaps Stone’s greatest legacy is his monumental two-volume *Bird Studies at Old Cape May* (Stone 1937; Figure 2), which fully details the distribution, abundance, seasonal occurrence, and historical status of bird species and the personal observations of scores of observers across all of southern New Jersey. Though perhaps overly preoccupied with spatiotemporal, phenological, or anecdotal aspects of Eastern birds, *Bird Studies at Old Cape May* deserves a place alongside the sumptuous area monographs of the time, such as those by Forbush, Roberts, Howell, Brandt, and Eaton et al. Although it lacks color plates by Fuertes, Brooks, Jacques, and their ilk, and does not have the descriptions, measurements, and full life histories of most of those tomes, it has 240 photographs, 8 maps, and 515

illustrations, many by Earl L. Poole (perhaps as unappreciated an artist as Stone was an ornithologist). McConnell notes that in spite of the richness of the volume, Stone emphasized waterbirds and spoke very little about the frequent staggering flights of passerines in the Cape May area. Regardless, *Bird Studies at Old Cape May* is regarded as a significant contribution to ornithology, one for which Stone was awarded the Brewster Medal posthumously in 1939. It is often noted for its charm and is held in such veneration by the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club that its former president has described the provenance of many of its sets (Sherman 2001).

Perhaps the significance of Stone’s contributions to the natural sciences during his lifetime is best reflected by his correspondence with some of the leading naturalists of his day. Stone wrote and received thousands of letters, and the book’s Index includes many notable individuals, such as Arthur A. Allen, Robert P. Allen (7 entries), John James Audubon, James Bond, William Brewster (16), Maurice Broun, John Cassin, Frank M. Chapman (29), Elliot Coues, Jonathan Dwight, Edward Howe Forbush, Herbert Friedmann (6), Louis Agassiz Fuertes, John Gould, Joseph Grinnell, Ludlow Griscom, W. L. McAtee, Edward McIlhenny, C. Hart Merriam (7), Robert Cushman Murphy (8), Thomas Nuttall, Harry C. Oberholser, T. S. Palmer, T. Gilbert Pearson (8), James L. Peters (8), Roger Tory Peterson (7), Richard Pough, Robert Ridgway (6), Theodore Roosevelt, George Miksch Sutton (5), J. K. Townsend, Alexander Wetmore (17), and Alexander Wilson. The Index is not all-inclusive, but this is understandable in a work with thousands of proper names, dates, book titles, and life forms. Also, the book would have been enhanced, though greatly lengthened, by a complete list of Stone’s publications.

One might be apprehensive that, with 2,294 chapter notes, *Witmer Stone* would be clunky reading, but McConnell’s fluid style, depth of understanding, and maturity of writing are a pleasure. The book is suffused with humor and wit—McConnell’s, Stone’s, and others’. For example, McConnell’s hilarious chapter on the development of the fourth edition of the *AOU Checklist of North American Birds* (Stone chaired the Checklist Committee) includes a Festschrift of accolades from prominent colleagues, with original (*vide* Scott McConnell) art by Allan Brooks and George Miksch Sutton (of STONEchat and Ruddy TurnSTONE; emphasis is the reviewer’s) and a witty poem with sophisticated scansion and rhyme by Arthur A. Allen.

Author Scott McConnell, a freelance wildlife biologist based in New Jersey, has degrees in wildlife and fisheries science from Pennsylvania State University (B.S., 2003) and Oklahoma State University (M.S., 2006). He has published in *Western Birds*, *Journal of Field Ornithology*, and *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*. The result of 5 years of

intensive research, McConnell's first book, *Witmer Stone: The Fascination of Nature*, excels in all respects that matter. Here's hoping that additional books are forthcoming and of the sterling quality of *Witmer Stone*.

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