

IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM J. BEECHER, 1914–2002

Authors: Lowther, Peter E., and Hennen, Mary

Source: The Auk, 120(1) : 199-201

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038\(2003\)120\[0199:IMWJB\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038(2003)120[0199:IMWJB]2.0.CO;2)

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Museum in Pietermaritzburg. He was Director of the Durban Museum and Art Gallery from 1 January 1952 until his retirement on 25 September 1982, and then continued as a research associate of the museum until his death.

Clancey wrote extensively about the taxonomy of African birds, naming some 200 subspecies of southern African birds; several avian subspecies have been named after him by others in his honor. His books include *Catalogue of the Birds of the South African Subregion* (1965–1972), *Handlist of the Birds of Southern Mozambique* (1970–1972, for which he was awarded the prestigious Gill Memorial Medal of the Southern African Ornithological Society, now BirdLife South Africa), *The Birds of Natal and Zululand* (1964), *The Gamebirds of Southern Africa* (1967), *The Rare Birds of Southern Africa* (1985), and *Kingfishers of Sub-Saharan Africa* (1992). He was the chief editor of the *S.A.O.S. Checklist of Southern African Birds* (1980) and a coauthor of the second volume of *Atlas of Speciation of African Birds* (1978). He also contributed to *The Atlas of Southern African Birds* (1997). Other publications total more than 530.

He served as President of the Southern African Ornithological Society and as the long-standing Chairman of its List Committee. He was also a long-standing Chairman of the Natal Bird Club (now BirdLife Port Natal) during the club's formative years, served as President of the Southern African Museums Association and was awarded a Fellowship by the Museums Association in London. He was elected a

Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1975. The University of Natal conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Science in 1981.

Clancey's skill in the preparation of bird skins was renowned. The Museum's collection, the third largest in Africa (some 32,000 bird study skins) many collected during his 26 major expeditions, is widely acknowledged as the finest on the continent. His trips to Mozambique resulted in the largest collection of material from that poorly known region. His discovery of the Lemon-breasted Canary, a species new to science, and of the southern Mozambique population of the Olive-headed Weaver were particular highlights. His success is reflected by the eminent ornithologists who have served there during and after his tenure, including Walter Lawson, Richard Brooke, Clive Quickelberge, Ian Sinclair, John Mendelsohn, and Aldo Berruti.

His artist talents are evident in the many bird paintings presented in his books and in the dioramas viewed by several million visitors to the Durban Natural Science Museum. Some of the dioramas were repainted up to six times until they matched his exacting standards. His avian portraits remain in high demand.

Clancey died in Durban on 18 July 2001. His portrait can be found in R.J. Dowsett's memorial in *Ibis* 144:369–370. Clancey was a rare combination of scientist, author, artist and administrator. His lifetime of meticulous dedication serves as an example for others.

The Auk 120(1):199–201, 2003

IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM J. BEECHER, 1914–2002

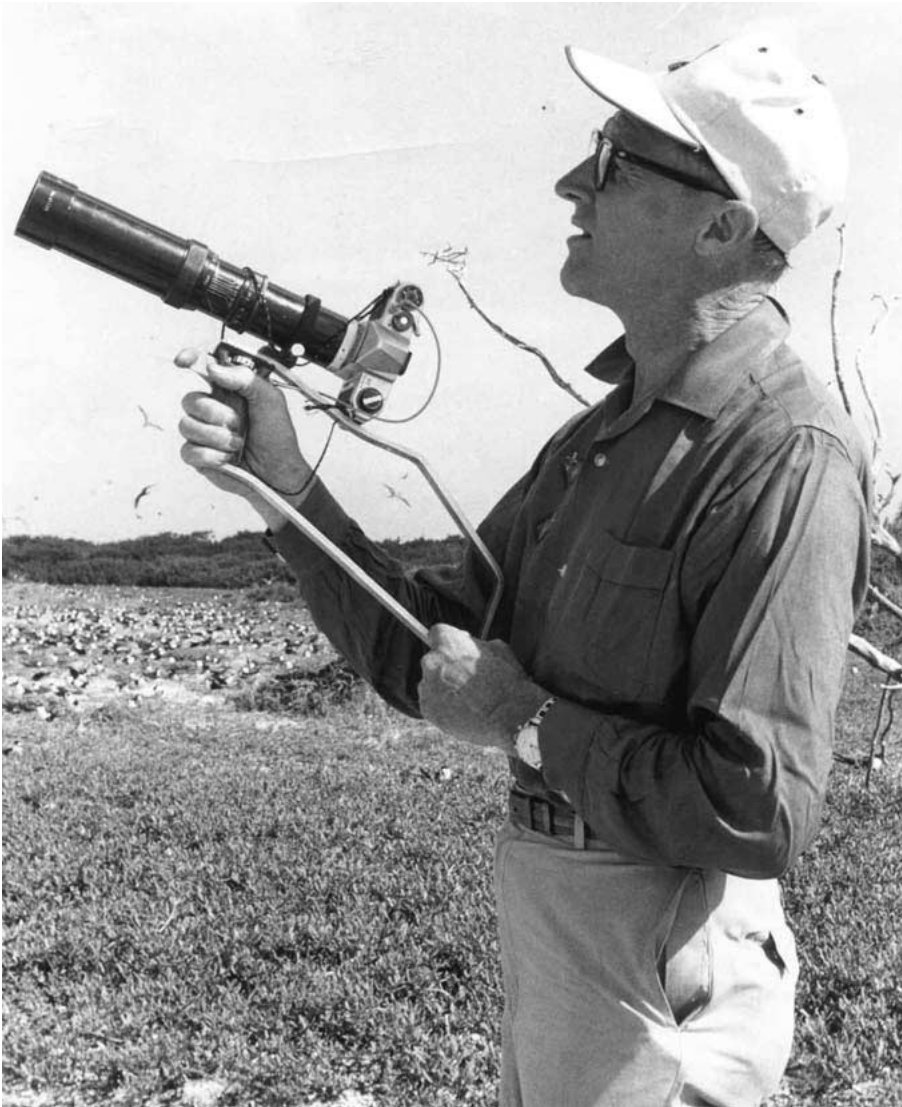
PETER E. LOWTHER AND MARY HENNEN

The Field Museum, 1400 South Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60605-2496, USA

William John Beecher, one of three children of Edward J. and Anna Beecher, was born 23 May 1914 in Chicago, Illinois. A lifetime resident of the Chicago area, he died 27 July 2002, at the home of a friend in Wood Dale, Illinois. His interest in birds began in earnest at age 15 as the result of a class assignment from Brother Anselm of St. Patrick Academy in Chicago; Beecher selected the Red-headed Woodpecker for the subject of his report and quickly became a bird fan.

Beecher attended the University of Chicago from 1938 to 1954 (except for army service from 1942 to 1945; while stationed in the southwest Pacific during World War II, he sent Field Museum 288 specimens from the Solomon Islands). He earned his bachelor's degree in 1947. His master's work—an ecological survey of the Fox Lake marshes where his parents

had a summer home (*Nesting Birds and the Vegetation Substrate*, Chicago Ornithological Society, 1942)—was conducted under the supervision of W. Rudyerd Boulton; his degree was awarded in 1949. Beecher was pleased by a favorable review given this publication by Joseph Hickey in *Audubon Magazine* and by the compliments from Aldo Leopold who told Beecher that he used it in his game management classes. Alfred E. Emerson served as his doctoral advisor and supervised his anatomical studies examining oscine phylogeny. That research was based on extensive dissections of anatomy of jaw musculature and skull structure, summarized in several publications (including "Convergent evolution in the American orioles," *Wilson Bulletin* 62: 51–86; "Adaptations for food-getting in the American blackbirds," *Auk* 68: 411–440; "A



WILLIAM J. BEECHER, 1914–2002

(Photo taken in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of Chicago Academy of Science.)

phylogeny of the oscines," *Auk* 70: 270–333); his Ph.D. was awarded in 1954.

Beecher joined the AOU in 1937 and became an Elective Member in 1950 and a Fellow in 1962. He served as a board member of the Illinois Audubon Society from 1948 to 1961 and as president of the Chicago Ornithological Society in 1946 and 1948.

From 1937 to 1942, Beecher served as an assistant zoologist at the Field Museum of Natural History. After completing his academic degrees, he became director of the Little Red School House Nature Center (part of Cook County Forest Preserve District) from 1954 to

1957 and then moved to become director of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, a position he held from 1958 until his obligatory retirement on 1 October 1983.

As Director of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, Beecher guided the Academy to emphasize nature education more, away from the scientific research institution it had been under its previous director. He directed modifications to exhibits, revamped the Atwood Celestial Sphere (a forerunner of the modern planetarium that was used to train navy pilots during World War II), and rehabilitated the Woodruff dioramas (using an innovative development of back-

grounds incorporating painting, shadows, and color transparencies). In the 1970s, he conducted an effective public relations campaign to encourage managers of some of Chicago's taller buildings to turn off lights in spring and fall to reduce collision mortality by migrating birds.

Beecher's interest in nature photography encouraged several world-wide trips and the invention of new equipment. While at the Chicago Academy, he traveled to Avery Island, Louisiana, to study trans-Gulf migration, and to various U.S. national parks, Africa (including Mt. Ruwenzori), Europe, Turkey, Lebanon, and Russia, often using the binocular camera he invented.

He also invented Beecher Mirage binoculars, using mirror optics that fit onto a spectacle frame and

function similarly to bifocals. His 85 g model was the rough equivalent of 7 × 35 binoculars. After retirement from the Chicago Academy in 1983, he set up a factory, the Beecher Research Company in Elgin, Illinois, to manufacture those binoculars. Although never popular with birders, Mirage binoculars were useful for people with macular degeneration. Most of the profits from this business were donated to efforts to conserve rain forests. He also kept up his personal research interest in the mechanics of the avian skull and would periodically visit the Field Museum of Natural History to examine skeletal specimens.

In his final years, Dr. Beecher's health dramatically declined and he was rarely seen in public. He will be remembered for his life-time commitment to nature education and bird conservation.