

## **100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union**

Author: Smith, Kimberly G.

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100 YEARS AGO IN THE AOU

## 100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union

Kimberly G. Smith

Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, USA  
[kgsmith@uark.edu](mailto:kgsmith@uark.edu)

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The question of avian subspecies was a hot topic 100 years ago, and the debate was playing out in the pages of *The Auk*. As mentioned previously (*The Auk* 129:797–798), the Sixteenth Supplement to the AOU Check-list prompted Joseph Grinnell to call for the elimination of all subspecies in the Check-list, as they were too confusing to amateurs. Then Jesse D. Figgins (1867–1944) weighed in with a paper entitled “The Fallacy of the Tendency towards Ultra-minute Decisions” (*The Auk* 31:62–69). He started by stating

“In certain genera many identifications are quite impossible unless the student be willing to accept purely geographical evidence of an extremely doubtful character. Indeed, there are now numerous forms unrecognizable by even their sponsors, except through a knowledge of the locality from which such specimens were taken; and were the subject of less importance one's regret would be limited by his sense of humor.”

He continued,

“A continuance of this “Futuristic” school of ornithology will obviously lead to geography as a text-book of more importance than present-day literature on birds; and it will be necessary to study the subject through the use of charts resembling contour maps or weather report bulletins.”

Figgins presented a comparison of Gambel's Quail (*Callipepla gambelii*) introduced into western Colorado in 1885 with specimens from California where the introduced birds came from, showing differences in coloration and surprisingly in morphology in both male and females. He attributed those differences to food, climate, and environment. He concluded,

“The question, therefore arises, what constitutes a subspecies? A great number of the recent subdivisions are based on far less evidence and

reason than is apparent in this example of introduced birds. If the extremists are justified in their activities are not the Colorado birds entitled to subdivision? If not, why not? Is it not time to return to sanity?”

Figgins was the first Director of the Colorado Museum of Natural History (later the Denver Museum of Nature and Science) from 1910 to 1935 and was associated with the University of Kentucky later in life, where he wrote *The Birds of Kentucky*, which was published posthumously in 1945.

Also 100 years ago, there was another great debate about what to do with the works of Mathurin Jacques Brisson (1723–1806) and Laurens Theodorus Gronovius (1730–1777) in terms of scientific nomenclature (e.g., Allen 1910). Modern taxonomy starts with the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Systema Naturae*, published by Linnaeus in 1758, in which species are given a binominal name for genus and species. Brisson, who some consider the “Father of Ornithology,” published his work on ornithology, more than 4,000 pages in 6 quarto volumes, in 1760 and used binary names to describe species. Likewise, Gronovius published *Museum Ichthyologicum* in 1754, in which he used a mixture of binomial and binary names for fish. Gregory M. Mathews (1876–1949), the famous ornithologist from Australia (see photo), thought all of Brissonian genera were “illegal” under his interpretation of the International Code (*The Auk* 31:86–91). But in the 20<sup>th</sup> opinion of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, Gronovian genera were deemed acceptable given that his binary names looked like binomials referring to genus and species. Mathews protested that opinion, and now he was protesting Opinion 36, which also allowed Brissonian genera “by the Code” (his emphasis). Mathews predicted that allowing binary genera to have precedent over legitimate binomial genera was going to be a taxonomic nightmare. This was exacerbated by the fact that Linnaeus used many of Brisson's “genera” for birds in his 10<sup>th</sup> edition (see Allen 1910). Mathews was a Corresponding

Fellow in the AOU from 1911 until 1927, when he was elected an Honorary Fellow. He authored the 12-volume series *The Birds of Australia* between 1910 and 1927.

It was still common to report species lists for a county or counties within a state, and articles appeared in 1914 from the states of Iowa (*The Auk* 31:70–81), Minnesota (82–86), Alabama (212–235), Colorado (309–333), and Florida (494–498). Wells W. Cooke reported on winter birds he had seen in Oklahoma during the winter of 1883–1884 (*The Auk* 31:473–493), stating that “Less has been published about the birds of Oklahoma than about those of any other state in the Union.” Robert Cushman Murphy had returned from his trip to the southern Atlantic with more than 500 specimens of mostly seabirds, and, since he realized it was going to take a long time to work through his collection, he presented a narrative of his trip with the species he saw with lots of photographs (*The Auk* 31:439–457). Reuben Myron Strong (1872–1964) published a two-part report (*The Auk* 31:22–49, 178–199) on his field studies and experiments with Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). One of the founding members of the Wilson Club, he was elected a Fellow in the AOU in 1949 in recognition of his 4-volume set, *A Bibliography of Birds*. In another two-part report, Albert Hazen Wright (1879–1970) traced the history of the Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) in North America. The first part dealt with reports from early explorers and travelers (*The Auk* 31:334–356) and the second part discussed hunting and trapping techniques (463–473).

In one of the first papers on avian community ecology, Aretas A. Saunders (1884–1970) presented a study on the ecology of the breeding birds near Choteau, Montana (*The Auk* 31:200–210). At the time he was an employee of the U.S. Forest Service with primarily a desk job, but he conducted this research in the early morning, in evenings, on Sundays, and on holidays. His study area was about 245 acres (99 ha), and he mapped the distribution of all singing males and linked them to 5 habitat types. Saunders would go on to produce *Birds of Montana* in 1921, but by 1914 he had left the Forest Service and started teaching high school in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he taught for the next 35 years. He continued his studies on avian ecology, mostly in the summer months, and authored a series of classic studies: *The Summer Birds of the Allegany State Park, New York* (1923), *The Summer Birds of the Northern Adirondacks* (1929), *Ecology of the Birds of Quaker Run Valley, Allegany State Park, New York* (1936), and *Summer Birds*



GREGORY MACALISTER MATHEWS was tall, bronzed, with silvery hair, blue eyes aided by a monocle, and a thin, prominent nose. He spoke rapidly in a high-pitched voice. He usually dressed as a country squire and is depicted thus in an oil portrait by Basil Gotto in 1929. Photo credit: National Library of Australia

*of the Allegany State Park* (1942). To my knowledge, he was the first ornithologist to incorporate ecological succession of vegetation into the study of avian ecology. He also authored the authoritative book, *A Guide to Bird Songs* (1935). Saunders joined the AOU in 1906 and was elected a Fellow in 1950. I would dub him the “Father of Avian Community Ecology.”

#### LITERATURE CITED

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