

100 Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union

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100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union



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In 1908, most of the featured articles in *The Auk* dealt with distribution of birds in North America, with few articles about birds in other parts of the world. A total of 17 articles dealt with bird distributions, five with nomenclature and taxonomy, four with John James Audubon letters (three written by Ruthven Deane), and two each on migration and nesting.

The spring of 1907 was unusually cold and snowy, and the first three articles of this volume discussed the effects of that spring on bird migration and nesting behavior. One report was by Norman A. Wood (*Auk* 25:10–15) and concerned the spring migration at Ann Arbor, Michigan. He had been monitoring spring migration there for 25 years and concluded, on the basis of long-term averages, that most migrating warblers arrived at about the right time. However, they did not leave the area on time, which resulted in new late dates of departure for nearly 26 species of warblers. He concluded that (p. 13)

This favors the belief that these birds are not governed exactly in their northward migration by weather or food conditions, but that while they may start out on their migration only under favorable conditions, they often migrate into regions of unfavorable conditions before being checked. Thus the species that reached this locality were in fine condition, but as the conditions here as well as to the northward were unfavorable, many individuals remained here an unusually long time.

Although he personally did not find any dead birds, he reported two cases, one in Michigan and one in Minnesota, where hundreds of dead birds were found after snow storms in mid- to late May.

At Ottawa, Ontario, which is quite a bit farther north, Reverend G. Eifrig (25:1–9) commented on the length of the migration that spring. He observed the first migrant, a Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), on 10 February 1907 and the last, a Blackpoll Warbler (*Dendroica striata*), on 12 June. Not only did he think that the length of the migration was longer than normal, but the variation within the migration period was dramatic. Migration virtually stopped from mid-April to mid-May during an unusually cold and snowy period, with a major snowstorm on 3 May and snow flurries as late as 28 May. Many individuals that arrived during that period starved to death. Birds were so weak that many people reported to Eifrig that they had never been able to pick up birds in their yards before. He reported that the mortality was “deplorable.” When birds finally showed up in migration, he found that they lingered longer than in previous years before moving farther north.

Louis Porter (25:16–21) reported on the nesting behavior of 13 species at Stamford, Connecticut, during the summer of 1907.

His general conclusions, based on long-term observations, were (p. 16)

that most birds commenced nest building at about the average calendar date, but that as a result of the cold season the more delicate species took very much longer in their nest building; when the nest was finally completed, the egg laying period was also protracted, extending to two or three times its usual period; and finally that after the set was completed, the birds, in some cases at least, did not immediately commence sitting.

Referring to another disaster, James H. Fleming (25:306–309) reported that more than 100 Tundra Swans (*Cygnus columbianus*) were swept to their death over Niagara Falls on 15 March 1908. Nearly 400 had arrived above the falls the day before, and they spent the day floating down the river near the falls and then flying back upstream. About noon the following day, Tundra Swans began going over the falls and became trapped in the ice bridge below the falls. Fleming hypothesized that the birds had become exhausted fighting the strong current above the falls.

Although by now it was generally known that Lawrence's Warbler was a hybrid, the status of Brewster's Warbler was still in doubt. Charles W. Townsend (25:65–68) questioned the most recent suggestion that Brewster's Warbler was a “leucochroic phase” of the Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora pinus*). Townsend had carefully studied the breeding male Brewster's Warbler at the Arnold Arboretum mentioned in a previous column (124:1107–1108). He concluded, on the basis of plumage and song, that there had to be some relationship between Brewster's Warbler and Golden-winged Warbler (*V. chrysoptera*).

The most important work published in 1908 was the classic paper “The Ecological Succession of Birds” written by Charles C. Adams (25:109–153), still a remarkably timely piece today. Adams (1873–1955) was one of the first ornithologists to see the importance of ecological succession to the habitat distribution of birds. Probably one of the longest articles published in *The Auk*, it also was the first to have a “References” section at the end of the article. Before this, references were handled using footnotes.

In a climate where field ecologists were increasingly being criticized for not using the experimental approach (Kohler 2002), Adams stressed the importance of observations and natural history. This is really the first major paper on habitat selection in birds, a subject that Adams suggested is “rarely considered . . . **worthy of serious scientific study.**” **His thesis was that** there is a correlation between environmental conditions and the distribution of birds. To Adams, “the influence of the environment should be studied in its bearing upon all phases of bird

life.” Adams admitted that there were few studies to date that addressed habitat selection in birds, and this article predated the great Clements–Gleason debate on ecological succession that would play out over the next two decades. Adams presented some habitat relationships among water, marsh, and shorebirds and terrestrial birds that would seem trivial today but represented a new way of thinking 100 years ago. For his prime example, he used the distribution of birds on Isle Royale in Lake Superior, which is now a national park.

Adams was clearly ahead of his time and a free thinker. He was one of the first to point out the role of humans in the environment and is generally acknowledged as the founder of the field of human ecology (Sears 1956). His insistence on the importance of observations and natural history bucked the trend during much of his early career at the University of Chicago and then at New York

State College of Forestry in Syracuse (Ilerbaig 1999). The disdain for field ecology at the time probably led him to establish himself as a wildlife biologist who championed the role of museums in ecological research (Kohler 2002:187–188).—KIMBERLY G. SMITH, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, USA. E-mail: kgsmith@uark.edu*

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