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100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union

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About 80 reviews of Recent Literature were published in 1912, many of which were synopses of papers published in other journals. Starting with journals published after 1 January 1912, the Recent Literature also included a section titled "The Ornithological Journals." The purpose of this new section was to present titles of articles from all the bird journals that the AOU received that might be of interest to readers of *The Auk*, who would otherwise not be aware of those articles. In some cases, short annotations were included to highlight the importance of the article. This section was the idea of the new editor, Witmer Stone, who became the second editor of *The Auk* starting with this volume. This section would continue as long as he was editor (24 years). In 1937, the third editor, Glover M. Allen, changed the section to "Periodical Literature" and the articles were listed by author in alphabetical order. That section continued until 1974, when it became too big and expensive to continue being printed in *The Auk* (see comments, Auk 92:189). For one year, "Foreign Periodical Literature" was published to decrease the size of the section, then "Recent Literature" continued as a supplement to *The Auk*.

One of the stranger reviews was titled "Gentry's 'Life-histories'—A Belated Review" (29:119–121) by Waldo Lee McAtee. As discussed previously (125:757), McAtee was an authority on food habits of birds, and Thomas George Gentry (1843–1905) had produced two volumes (1876, 1877) on the life histories of birds in eastern Pennsylvania in which he went into great detail about the food habitats of almost every species. McAtee was of the opinion that "by common consent [these volumes] have been very consistently ignored by American ornithologists" and that they should be "generally consigned to oblivion." However, a recent publication in Europe quoted Gentry's works extensively as the truth, leading McAtee to set the record straight, even after nearly 40 years. Gentry stated that he had examined over 700 stomachs of birds, but went on to discuss the diets of nearly 100 species and, in some cases, listed over 50 items in a single diet. McAtee argued that such details would be impossible for that many species if only 700 stomachs were examined. In many cases, Gentry mentioned food items that had never been reported for a particular species, like caterpillars for swifts and nighthawks, or food items for winter birds that occur only in the summer. McAtee concluded:

> The 'Life-Histories of the Birds of Eastern Pennsylvania' must be known then as a dangerous mixture of fact and unfact. Its accuracy in some respects gives it a deceptive appearance of verity, but with regard to the records of bird food it is certain that the only safe course is to regard them as almost entirely products of the author's imagination.

Gentry was the author of another book on *Illustrations of Nests and Eggs of Birds of the United States* (1882), in which he presented information on nesting ecology of each bird in minute detail. In his review of that work in the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club* (7:214–249), C. Hart Merriam could not believe that one person could know so much about each bird, calling the book "trash."

The 100th anniversary of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia occurred on 21 March 1912 (29:282). At that time, it was one of the oldest scientific societies in America and probably the oldest of those devoted purely to the natural sciences. A long list of famous ornithologists was associated with the Academy during its first 100 years, and its Journal and Proceedings were where most all important ornithological works were published prior to the advent of journals dedicated to birds. Recently merged with Drexel University, The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University celebrated its bicentennial earlier this year as America's oldest natural history museum. At the centennial, there were about 60,000 bird specimens in the collection, which today numbers 215,000 study skins and tissue samples. An important aspect of the collection is the number of skins from famous collectors like Audubon that predate the founding of the museum.

In the Letters to the Editor, Robert Wilson Shufeldt (1850–1934) gave great details about how to photograph bird eggs (29:274–276), which, he stated, "stand among the most difficult of all small, inanimate objects representing biological material that the naturalist seeks to obtain photographs of for illustrative purposes." In a long and rather rambling letter (29:561–565), Joseph Grinnell reacted to the publication of the Sixteenth Supplement to the AOU Check-list, which mainly dealt with subspecies. According to Grinnell, the AOU Committee had only four functions: (1) To decide upon a system of groupings, that is, upon what genera and higher groups are to be recognized, and upon the sequence of these and the contained species. (2) To decide upon cases of nomenclature, where from various contingencies the correct name of the species may be in more or less doubt. (3) To determine the boundaries of 'North America,' and to pass upon the claims for inclusion in the North American list of various vagrant species, so rare that the evidence of occurrence must be examined and weighed. (4) To decide as to the merits of the various finely differentiated subspecies which are being named by systematic students, both as to the validity of the characters assigned, and as to whether the degree of difference is sufficiently well marked to warrant recognition in the official Check-list.

Grinnell first faulted the Committee for shirking its duties 1 and 2 in publishing the Third Edition of the AOU Checklist. The

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Committee apparently stated that presenting a modern system of classification would be too "inconvenient," which Grinnell labels as "flimsy." He next faulted the Committee for not doing anything different in the Sixteenth Supplement—not a single nomenclatural ruling was presented. Grinnell argued that there were many changes proposed, but the Committee decided to ignore them, which Grinnell called "provoking." The Committee did, however, pass judgment on 34 proposed subspecies, accepting 13 new ones for the Check-list.

The main argument of Grinnell's letter is that "The poor Committee has the amateur on the one hand and the specialist on the other." The AOU Check-list was the only available reference on the birds of North America, and amateurs were interested primarily in species and confused about subspecies, particularly those that cannot be distinguished in the field. Systematic ornithologists, particularly "splitters," on the other hand, want recognition for their research into subspecific variation. Because amateurs far outnumber professionals, the Check-list should eliminate all references to subspecies, according to Grinnell: "one name for the Robin from the Atlantic to the Pacific, only one Song Sparrow and one Horned Lark in all North America." A secondary publication should be developed that includes the work of specialists, and the AOU should hire a full-time employee to be housed in Washington, D.C., to effectively deal with the issue of subspecies by communicating with specialists themselves. Grinnell felt that a committee could deal with species but was unqualified to really judge the merits of particular subspecies.

An anonymous piece in the first issue started with the following (29:136–137):

> The rapid decrease in the number of bird collectors is a matter that has attracted the serious attention of ornithologists in the past few years. It is certainly true that there are today, very few young men engaged in forming a collection of bird-skins, formerly regarded as a *sine qua non* to the development of an ornithologist. So serious has this matter appeared to some that it has been suggested that the A. O. U. Committee on the Protection of North American Birds might well be changed to a Committee for prevention of the extermination of North American ornithologists.

Apparently, one had to be male (!) and have a bird collection to become an ornithologist. The pendulum was swinging the other way, and many states had passed laws that made it almost impossible to get permits to collect birds. The author(s) of this piece thought that it should be the role of the AOU to educate state legislators and game managers about the importance of scientific collecting. One theory was that the lack of young collectors was due to the difficulty in securing the proper permits.

Another theory put forth was that the taxonomy of birds in the eastern United States was so well understood that more collecting there was probably unnecessary, so that young would-be ornithologists were turning to other taxa in which new discoveries were still possible. The piece concluded:

> So, even while we maintain that collecting birds is still a necessary part of ornithological science in many parts of the world, and will always be so in anatomical and certain other lines of investigation, nevertheless whenever the systematic side of ornithology becomes practically a completed study, we must naturally expect to find a decrease in collectors, and this without danger of ornithologists becoming extinct.

It would appear that 100 years ago it was inconceivable that bird systematic work could be conducted without shooting specimens. There also is the hint that the feeling at that time was that all the systematic relationships of birds would eventually be worked out, and that that aspect of ornithology would be greatly diminished. I wonder when that will happen.—Kimberly G. Smith, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, USA. E-mail: kgsmith@uark.edu*

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