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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
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.