

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

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# 100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union



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The first book reviewed by Editor J. A. Allen in 1908 (*Auk* 25:89–90) was *A Preliminary Catalog of the Birds of Missouri* by Otto Widmann (1841–1933). Born in Germany, Widmann immigrated to the United States when he was 24 years old, eventually settling in St. Louis, where he was a pharmacist. Interested in natural history, particularly birds, he began collecting information on the birds of Missouri in 1877. He wrote the land-birds section of the book first, but a fire in 1902 destroyed the manuscript and his diaries of 25 years while he was on a trip to Europe. Upon his return, he rewrote the manuscript, and it was published five years later. It is a historical work, because the Missouri Ozark forests were being clear-cut for railroad ties and lumber during the late 1800s when he was collecting data for the book. He correctly predicted the demise of several species in Missouri (e.g., Brown-headed Nuthatch [*Sitta pusilla*], Red-cockaded Woodpecker [*Picoides borealis*]) as a result of logging activity. Elected a Fellow of the AOU in 1884, Widmann complained that the annual meeting did not contain enough social opportunities (Palmer 1954). This led to the start of receptions, buffet lunches, and the annual banquet at AOU meetings. At the time of his death, at 92, he was the oldest living member of the AOU.

Allen also reviewed (25:90–93) two curious works by C. William Beebe, Curator of Birds at the New York Zoological Society. The first paper (Beebe 1907) dealt with a common perception of the time that high humidity, particularly in the tropics, caused birds to have darker plumages. In the first three parts of the paper, he reviewed evidence of effects of climate on coloration in animals, melanism in wild animals, and melanism in caged animals. The next two sections concerned experiments Beebe performed on Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*), and Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*). These birds were confined to a “superhumid” atmosphere, with the following results: the Wood Thrush molted once with no change, but the black spots on the breast were bigger after the second molt, when the bird died; after two molts, the White-throated Sparrow became “strongly melanistic”; and the Inca Doves changed from dark brown or black to a brilliant iridescence or bronze or green on the wings. Beebe pointed out that many tropical doves have that iridescence. Noting that the ancestor of the Inca Dove was probably from the tropics, Beebe concluded that such traits were “atavistic.” The paper concluded with a long discussion about natural selection and ontogenetic species. Beebe stated that “these interesting and significant results open up innumerable new vistas of unexplored fields,” to which Allen replied “we trust he will be able to unfold to us through further experiments with these and other species.”

The second paper (Beebe 1908) concerned a Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) and a Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). Both birds were captured during the breeding season and put in cages in a quiet room, with gradually decreasing light and increasing food. Neither bird molted in the fall. After normal conditions were restored in the spring, both birds molted into breeding plumage. Beebe (1908:37–38) concluded that

I think we thus have proof that the sequence of plumage in these birds is not in any way predestined through inheritance bringing about an unchangeable succession, in the case of the tanager, of scarlet—green, scarlet—green, year after year, but that it may be interrupted by certain external factors in the environmental complex.

The Annual Report of the National Association of Audubon Societies for 1907, written by William Dutcher, was also summarized by Editor Allen (25:101–102). The greatest accomplishment was the establishment of bird refuges by President Theodore Roosevelt. The Audubon Societies were responsible for finding these potential refuges and reporting them to the Department of Interior. If they were deemed appropriate and were still owned by the federal government, an Executive Order was sent to the President. The Society would then nominate a person to be commissioned as a warden by the Department of Agriculture, which split the salary with the Society. Dutcher prophetically stated that “the plan of bird and animal refuges is destined to be a great factor in the future in the preservation of the wild life of the country.” However, there were problems:

The reservations we are securing are the beginning of the plan of refuges, but the federal government owns no land in any of the thirteen original states nor does it own land in Texas. In these fourteen states, the proposed system of refuges can be secured only by purchase or by a legislative act.

In August of 1908, President Roosevelt set aside the Key West Reservation in the Gulf of Mexico, including all of the keys and islands of the Florida Keys group; the Klamath Lake Reservation in Oregon and California, including Lower Klamath Lake and its islands and contiguous marsh and swamp lands; and Lake Malheur Reservation, including lakes Malheur and Harney and their connecting waters.

There was also this announcement (25:497):

A new department has recently been established at the University of California to be known as the California Museum of Vertebrate Zoölogy. This has been made possible through the generosity of

Miss Annie M. Alexander, of Oakland, Cal., who is an alumnus of the University and deeply interested in the vertebrate fauna of North America, and especially in that of California, which is thus far poorly represented in the museums of the State. A feature of the new museum will be the accumulation of material for original research, the collection of ecological data, and the representation of leading types by mounted groups. It is planned to have at least two skilled collectors in the field in the interest of the Museum. The University will provide a suitable building for the reception and installation of the material. Dr. Joseph Grinnell has been selected as Curator, and active field work was begun early in the present year. This undertaking cannot fail to yield results of great importance in a field as yet very imperfectly developed.

In a very blunt letter to the editor (25:494–496), John Lewis Childs questioned the fact that anyone could pay \$3 to join the AOU (and become an “Associate Member”) but that the number of Fellows was capped at 50 and the number of “Members” (now known as “Elective Members”) was capped at 100. He pointed out that several Members had better records than some Fellows and that some Associate Members had better records than some Members. He asked:

Is it a good policy to keep a man years in the “associate” or primary class waiting for a vacancy in the “members” class, and when a vacancy occurs, he or his friends must put up a fight for it and if he wins it is at the expense of some others whose claim to advancement is as good or better than his own?

Childs had waited 6 or 7 years to be made Member and he had had enough: he resigned.

Editor Allen offered the following explanation: membership is sought and valued in direct proportion to its numerical limitations. The fact that only 50 people can be Fellows makes that designation more valuable. The mistake that the AOU had made was that they named 50 Fellows when the society was established, whom, Allen contended, were the top 50 ornithologists of the day.

They did not anticipate the blossoming of ornithology as a science over the next 25 years, so that Allen agreed with Childs that some people with superior credentials were stuck at a lower membership level. Establishing 100 Members was an attempt to recognize members with distinguished careers who eventually might become Fellows. Allen concluded that 50 was still a good number for Fellows. This debate would rage on for another 25 years (Barrow 1998:70–73).

Childs (1856–1921) was a self-made man. He grew up on a farm in Maine, but as a teenager he moved to Long Island in New York, where he eventually started the first seed catalogue business in the United States. Incredibly successful, he started the town of Floral Park, New York, and shipped seeds all over the world. He also had a passion for natural history. He had one of the finest private libraries of North American natural history in the world and the largest private collection of mounted North American birds, most with nest and eggs (Condor 9:163–164). In 1905, he started a magazine that would focus on the rarer species of birds in North America, *The Warbler*. After two volumes, he stated that he was discontinuing the series because of a lack of subscriptions (Condor 9:115–116), though he went on to publish at least seven volumes by 1913 (Auk 31:125).—KIMBERLY G. SMITH, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, USA. E-mail: kgsmith@uark.edu*

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