

## In Days Before "The Club"

SOME PHILADELPHIA BIRD COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS

BY SPENCER TROTTER

THIS paper is reminiscent of youthful days spent in the delightful pursuit of ornithological study. Very few persons that I knew then seemed to care much about birds. A cousin in New York, Newbold T. Lawrence, a nephew of the ornithologist George N. Lawrence, early fired my zeal in the direction of forming a collection. Newbold Lawrence had a fine collection of birds stowed in a great case of drawers, over which I used to linger as a boy when staying at his home in New York. It was he who first instructed me in the art of making a bird-skin. That was at his summer home near Far Rockaway, Long Island, back in the early seventies. I have a vivid recollection of this first bird-skin—it was a Least Tern. Lawrence had a very complete collection of the water fowl, bay snipe, and plover of the Long Island coast. I have spent many hours with him on the salt marshes, lying in a "blind" on the border of the "Big Pond," or some of the other shallow waters of these "flats," shooting Yellowlegs, Dowitchers, Willets, and other species over the "stools." One of the visits to his New York home was a red letter experience. I took supper one evening with "Cousin George" (George N. Lawrence), who showed me his splendid collection and told me of his early acquaintance with the great Audubon, and also of a certain Philadelphia collector of birds, one Christopher D. Wood, who had a shop on Market Street, Philadelphia, somewhere between Thirty-fourth and Thirty-sixth Streets. On that visit I was presented with a copy of Coues' "Key," 1st edition, by my uncle. On another visit I met Harold Herrick, who later married one of my cousins, a sister of Newbold. Herrick had recently described the inter-

esting Warbler, *Helminthophaga lawrencei*, named by him in honor of George N. Lawrence. He had also published a list of the birds of Grand Manan. All this, however, concerns New York and not Philadelphia.

Armed with "Chris" Woods' address I soon found my way to his shop and expended twenty-five cents on the skin of a Chestnut-sided Warbler. For many years after I was on intimate terms with the genial "Chris," a constant visitor to his shop, which was always redolent of the smell of bird flesh, dried skins and arsenic. Wood was really a wonderful collector and a splendid field ornithologist, but he had no more idea of scientific ornithology than a cat. He belonged to a race that has become well-nigh extinct; a peculiar race of unlettered men, but possessed of a marvelous instinct for finding birds and with lots of information as to the habits and notes of various species. I remember "Chris" once saying that, if you heard a Chipping Sparrow's song in the woods, it was sure to be a Worm-eating Warbler that was the performer, for a Chippy was not a dweller in woodland, and the songs of the two birds had a certain resemblance. Woods' father and one or two of his brothers were also good collectors. Charlie Wood was taxidermist in John Krider's old gunshop at the N. E. corner of Second and Walnut Streets at one time. John Krider himself belonged to this same type, a quasi-scientific sportsman. Public sentiment against killing song birds, the spread of suburbs over the near-by countryside, the wilder woodlands thus becoming more and more remote from the city, and the precarious livelihood dependent upon taxidermy and commercial bird-collecting, were factors in the extinction of this interesting race.

The instinct to collect things is a kind of bower-bird trait that develops in many normal individuals at a certain period of their lives. Its particular nature may be predetermined by circumstance—a few books, running later to first editions (and in some cases to book-plates), stamps and coins, clocks and china (I even know a man, who at one time collected wish-bones, and thought the wish-bone of a Bobolink his highest acquisition), butterflies and birds' eggs. Out of it all may come an orderly arrangement of the mind—a life-long pursuit, a master in some

branch of technical study, or it may all become the junk of abandoned youthful enthusiasms. It seems to me that of all things, the most lasting and refreshing, the most liable to lead to some permanent good to the individual, is the collecting of natural objects, for it takes the devotee away over the hills and out under the wide sky, and therein lies much of the inspiration of the natural history collector—the incipient state of mind that makes a good naturalist. The butterfly net, the fishing for species rather than sport, the small-bore gun and the dust-shot load—what meanings they have in the life of the mind! In the days of which I am writing about it was not uncommon for men to go shooting in the fall of the year, and a variety of the smaller birds, Meadow Larks, Robins, Blackbirds and Flickers, fell to their guns. Nor was this slaughter considered so diabolical a crime as it is to-day. And these were ordinarily humane gentlemen, mark you! I remember that Cousin George Lawrence went robin-shooting every autumn for years, and probably my very first interest in birds came when as a small chap I used to pick up Red-headed Woodpeckers, Flickers, Bluejays and Cedarbirds that my father shot on the hills near Baltimore. Very well I remember the Wild Pigeon that he killed out of a small flock that flew over us on one of these occasions. This going afield with a gun was, I think, a survival of old pioneer days. I am glad that these days are past, but I am glad also that I was born before they had wholly disappeared. The camera has come, and these recent collections of bird pictures are full of wonderful interest, but among the formative influences of my youth, and in the days of “Chris” Wood, outdoor photography was but an ill-developed art. A man is in large measure always a part of his youthful fancies and his youthful environment.

I reaped many a good harvest from “Chris” Wood’s gun, and my bird collection grew apace, but his data were not without question. He never kept a note or labeled a specimen. The locality and approximate date of a specimen’s capture were generally all that I could get out of “Chris.” The peculiar hybrid Swallow came into my hands a few days after it was shot, and also the second specimen of Brewster’s Warbler.

Both of these birds brought me into relations with the then young men of the Nuttall Club and with their newly-started "Bulletin." The Swallow later brought a great letter from Elliot Coues and also a notice of it in his "Birds of the Colorado Valley." During the years 1878-79 and '80 I was a Jessup Fellow at the Academy of Natural Sciences, working on the bird collection which was in a state bordering on chaos. In those days I met Coues, Baird, and two British ornithologists, F. Ducane Godman and Henry Seebohm. Mr. Seebohm had come over from London to look up some specimens of Thrushes in the Academy's collection, on which family he was then engaged in writing a monograph. From "Chris" Wood I got some good data for a list of rare birds taken by him around Philadelphia. This paper was sent to the Linnean Society of New York and first published in "Forest and Stream," and later in the "Nuttall Bulletin." It was all fine enthusiasm in those days.

At school, in the early seventies, I first met Will Collins, a boon companion who, like myself, was just starting to make a collection of birds. I have his collection now at Swarthmore; my collection went to Bryn Mawr. Collins made an honest collection; the majority of the specimens were shot by himself around his home, on a farm near Frankford. Before ill health forced him to give up, he had accumulated most of the species of the smaller land birds of this district. The days spent with Collins hunting birds over that country about his farm are among the most delightful recollections of my youth. We both became quite expert in the use of an implement, called the "slap-jack," and a good many interesting birds fell into our hands through this means, especially when pursuing birds in more or less thickly-settled places. I remember one day in October, 1876, Collins and I started for the Centennial Exhibition in Fairmount Park. We got as far as Snyder's Woods, a most attractive spot in those days and really quite wild, when the sight of some shy migrant lured us from the path. Presently I heard Collins calling in a low voice, and when I reached him he was standing under a small tree, on one of the lower limbs of which sat a little Saw-whet Owl, at which he was pep-

pering away with his slap-jack. He finally hit it, and then we walked back to my home in the city and made a skin of it that evening. On another occasion, one September morning, Collins shot a Philadelphia Vireo from among some willows on the breast of an old dam near his Frankford home. In September of the following year, I shot another of this species at a spot not a quarter of a mile from where Collins captured his bird. This was rather remarkable for a species quite rare in this region. In those days the Dickcissels used to nest in certain fields of timothy and clover about the farm (we called them Black-throated Buntings). Collins and I each got several specimens, but we did not realize how limited was their eastern distribution or how soon they were to vanish from this locality. In May and June the dry, monotonous note of the bird could be heard all day long from fence rail or telegraph wire along the road near these fields. Among many interesting birds secured by Collins in his neighborhood were a female Blue Grosbeak and a Mourning Warbler, the former taken in the fall of 1879. The winter of that year (January and February) was remarkable for great numbers of Red-poll Linnets, of which Collins secured a goodly lot. Through Collins I first heard of S. N. Rhoads, of Haddonfield, N. J., an enthusiastic young ornithologist whose early promise has been amply fulfilled. He it was who first reported the nesting of the Blue-winged Yellow Warbler in Chester County, Pa., as an early contribution to the "Nuttall Bulletin." George Spencer Morris rose on my horizon a little later, though I did not meet him for some years. Both of these ornithologists have made valuable collections, much of Rhoads' material being now in the collection of the Academy. William L. Baily I have known from boyhood, but he was not inoculated with the bird fever until the days when he was a student at Haverford College. I know that he made a good collection, but later dropped the gun for the camera, with which he has done such splendid work. William L. Abbot I also knew as a frequenter of the Academy, a good field ornithologist and old time collector. I met him one day in the fall of 1890 and told him that I had a fine baby boy. He retorted that he had a fine elephant gun and was just starting for East Africa after big

game. I do not remember having seen him since that day. All of the young ornithologists I have just mentioned made collections of birds around Philadelphia, and these, together with their notes on various species, laid much of the foundation of our present useful data.

Somewhere along in these years I made the acquaintance of Mr. John McIlvaine, a retired lumber merchant of West Philadelphia. He was a delightful old gentleman, and I always remember him as wearing a high silk hat in his own home. He was still collecting birds, which he mounted in remarkably life-like attitudes. William Freedley was another ornithologically-inclined sportsman and egg-collector. About this time, too, I met William F. Lee of West Chester, Pa., who had he lived would have been my brother-in-law. Lee was an artist in taxidermy and a good all-round ornithologist. His collection of mounted birds is still at his mother's home in West Chester. What delightful additions Lee and Collins would have made to our coterie of Club members had they lived, both as ornithologists and as companions !

Witmer Stone and Stewardson Brown were making a fine collection of birds in the Germantown district during the eighties, but I did not meet Stone until he came to the Academy as a Jessup student. I believe that I voice the sentiment of all who know him that he is the bright and particular star in our ornithological firmament, and that the life and vigor of our Club has been in largest measure due to his broad knowledge and untiring zeal.

In later days I came to know Charles J. Pennock, and with him I have renewed my youth and enthusiasm in the field. C. J. is an old-time ornithologist and not much of anything rare and desirable gets into Delaware that gets out again, without leaving a record of itself in the shape of either hide or note. Pennock began his ornithological life away back in the seventies, but his earlier work was largely about Ithaca, N. Y., and Princeton, N. J., and around his home at Kennett Square, Penna.

One other ornithologist I must mention, though he was not of our generation and did not regard himself as an ornithologist—

the late Professor Edward D. Cope. His was a brilliant and widely-ranging mind, of a vast acquirement of knowledge and profound philosophy. He was a pioneer in the study of faunal distribution, and his review of the zoögeographical regions in the "Bulletin" of the U. S. National Museum published in 1875, contained much interesting matter relating to the ranges of various birds. The copy which he presented to me, and which I still have, opened a new field of interest and one to which I have ever since been attracted. Cope edited a small book, "Our Own Birds," written by William Lloyd Baily (an uncle of our Wm. L. Baily). Among Cope's extensive collection of vertebrates was a small collection of bird skins, which had been made by Bernard Hoopes, who like Cope, belonged to the generation before us. I remember this collection as containing several specimens of the Cape May Warbler and, rarest of all, a Bachman's Warbler. This collection is now a part of the Academy of Natural Science's collection.

There must have been many other persons interested in ornithology during these years, but I did not have the good fortune to meet them. That was in the days before The Club. To me, the one great feature of the Club has been the bringing together of men of like tastes and interests—pleasant companions to foregather with at the meetings, where communications and discussions enrich one's mind and fill the days that follow with much fine thinking about birds and men and the background of the world beyond the door-step—of deep woods and tangle-bordered streams, of wind-swept beaches and lonely marshes, of the uplifting hills, and over all the light and dark of the brooding sky—the highway of the bird.