

Delaware Valley Ornithological Club



REMEMBERING JOHN DUPONT

By Harry Armistead January 2015

John DuPont was in my fraternity at the University of Pennsylvania, - Zeta Psi. Knowing of my interest in birds he asked me to accompany him, in October 1959, to his vacation house at Rehoboth, Delaware. To do so we had to miss a fraternity rushing party. One of our brothers remarked with undisguised scorn: "You'd think it was the only weekend when the birds would fly." It was a pleasant weekend with no signs of the psychopathology that would plague John, and affect others, tragically, later on. I remember him buying us a huge steak for dinner.

On the Delaware coast we came across a group of 60 or so Tree Swallows that had apparently swooped in front of a car. To my astonishment John retrieved every one of them for his taxidermist saying: "This will make a good series." Presumably they are in the Delaware Museum of Natural History now. When we passed a large building near Wilmington John quipped: "This will be the heron department of the new museum." The museum was one of his dreams, and, with his enormous wealth, he apparently lured away some prominent curators from other established museums, including the renowned malacologist R. Tucker Abbott.

I remember we saw a Western Kingbird near Bethany Beach that John, with my encouragement, tried to collect. In his speedboat near Indian River Inlet he spun around with one hand on the helm, another on his shotgun, trying to collect a Turkey Vulture. He told me he had found a Swainson's Warbler nest in Delaware, but would not disclose the location. I didn't press the issue.

At the end of the weekend we spent the night in the DuPont mansion, Liseter Hall, at Newtown Square, PA. I met his mother (played by Vanessa Redgrave in the current film 'Foxcatcher'). Off to the side of the main door entrance, on the right as one enters, was a room with the walls literally full of medals, trophies, and ribbons won at horse shows. On the top floor John had installed a sort of de facto museum library with the world's professional ornithological journals neatly laid out on tables surrounded by ranks of specimen shelving, trays full of birds and shells. The following morning we drove in to Penn to our classes. In 'Foxcatcher' a book is shown purporting to be one he authored, I think it was entitled Birds of the Northeast. I don't think he ever wrote such a book.

In October 1959, when we crossed the Murderkill River in Delaware, John quipped "He wanted to make sure," ironic since many years later John would be convicted of homicide.

John told me he had collected a Long-eared Owl at the family place near Neavitt, Talbot County, MD, that comprised 999 acres. Later, for several years, this became the Jean Ellen DuPont Sheehan Audubon Center, with which several members of the Talbot Bird Club were closely associated. Amy Bourque (Scott Weidensaul's wife) was Director there. I do not know the story of this center's demise.

John authored Philippine birds (1971, 480pp., introduction by Dean Amadon, Delaware Museum of Natural History monograph series 2) and South Pacific birds (1976, 218pp., introduction by Kenneth C. Parkes, D.M.N.S. monograph series 3) and numerous periodical articles. Those 2 books are heavily invested in dealing with subspecies. On revisiting these 2 books last fall after many years I find them more consequential than I had remembered, but the art (not his) is mediocre.

John was also a collector of shells and stamps and one of his stamps - he originally acquired it for \$935,000 - was auctioned after his death for \$9,500,000. His Wikipedia entry is full of information and seems quite complete. He was also a world class competitor in the Pentathlon. John flew helicopters and was a volunteer policeman locally before he became so profoundly paranoid schizophrenic. To some extent we are all lost sheep, some much, much more so than others.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s Penn enjoyed something of an ornithological presence with the late Robert MacArthur as a faculty member, 1958-1965 (author of The theory of island Biogeography, Princeton, 1967, co-authored with E. O. Wilson). He died at the age of 42. Later Robert E. Ricklefs taught at Penn (1968-1995). My friend the late Jared Sparks remarked how one of Ricklef's courses went into deep detail concerning the life history of the Red-winged Blackbird. My high school friend, Will Russell, studied at Penn when I was there, years before he established the tour company WINGS. Will once said to me that the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club was his de facto fraternity at Penn.

John DuPont was wealthy (extremely so), influential, full of ambition and special interests. He made a good start in the natural history field before he became so chronically mentally ill and terribly eccentric, culminating in his inexplicable shooting to death of the Olympic wrestler, one of his protégés, David Schultz. John died in prison recently. I'd heard that he gave lectures about birds to the inmates. The movie 'Foxcatcher' is very good, although it does drag a little at times.

du Pont is spelled variously, duPont (in John's books), du Pont in the Social Register, sometimes Du Pont or DuPont elsewhere, almost as various as last name variations of Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee, the late ornithology curator at the Academy of Natural Sciences.

Best to all. – Harry Armistead, Philadelphia.