

# THE AUK

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF  
ORNITHOLOGY

---

VOL. 87

JULY 1970

NO. 3

---

## IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM HENRY PHELPS

ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY

WILLIAM H. PHELPS, a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union since 1952, exemplified supremely well the role of the amateur in natural science. Active in business throughout the greater part of his long life, he nevertheless contributed more to the sum of knowledge about the enormously large avifauna of one tropical American country than had any previous worker. He also planned for the future by establishing a museum in which Venezuelan birds are adequately, indeed almost completely, represented.

The amateur has been more characteristic of the British than of the American tradition. Foremost among all such independently creative men was Charles Darwin, who throughout his career never served on a faculty or received a salary. In the earlier record of ornithology on our continent we likewise find numerous individuals, free of financial dependence on museum or university, who pursued their investigations through many rewarding years. They were the able precursors of the technically professional naturalists of today. Among such older ones are Jonathan Dwight, Jr., John C. Phillips, and Arthur Cleveland Bent. A notable example among colleagues still living is Mrs. Margaret Morse Nice. William H. Phelps who, despite all other demands upon his time, hewed to the line of relationships, zonal distribution, and seasonal movements of birds in Venezuela, virtually to the day of his death on December 8, 1965, at the ripe old age of ninety years, belongs in the same category.

Phelps was born in New York City on June 14, 1875, the son of a lawyer, Dudley F. Phelps, and of Louise Lander Prince Phelps. From early childhood he showed an interest in birds. He was graduated from Milton Academy in 1892, and from Harvard College, cum laude, in 1897. He had interrupted his undergraduate course between junior and senior years in order to make a personal ornithological expedition in Venezuela, of which the fruits, including birds new to science, were presented to the American Museum of Natural History. This trip afield became also the subject of his

WILLIAM H. PHELPS, 1875–1965



(Photograph by Guillermo Zuloaga at Isla de Aves, Caribbean Sea, 1954)

first published contribution, entitled "Birds observed on a collecting trip to Bermúdez, Venezuela. By William Henry Phelps. With critical notes and descriptions of two new species, by Frank M. Chapman" (Auk, 14: 357, 1897).

While an undergraduate, Phelps had become a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. He joined the American Ornithologists' Union, too, in 1895. In those days, before competing cities all over the United States and Canada clamored for Union meetings, the ornithologists assembled in Cambridge at 4-year intervals. The young man had an opportunity at Harvard to sink deep roots among the pioneers. He made contact with Coues, Merriam, D. G. Elliot, Dutcher, Nelson, Bendire, Lucas, J. A. Allen, Chapman, Deane, Ridgway, and other kindred spirits, who at that date were developing many facets of the *scientia amabilis*. He also knew Brewster, Batchelder, Forbush, and Maynard as members of the Nuttall Club.

At both Milton Academy and Harvard, Phelps distinguished himself as an athlete. A member of the freshman crew in college, he decided that rowing required too much of a student's time, so he abandoned it at year's end and switched to the track team, specializing in the high jump. His social responsibility is shown by his teaching of underprivileged boys at Phillips Brooks House. A classmate has paid him high tribute as the embodiment of strength, wit, adventuresomeness, and leadership based on the admiration and affection of his fellows.

After receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science, Phelps promptly returned to Venezuela to enter the business of preparing coffee for the market at San Antonio de Maturín, in the eastern part of the country. Ornithology, however, was at all times in the periphery of his eye. I have heard him say that, with youthful enthusiasm, he had visions of building within four years a competence that would enable him to retire and devote the rest of his life to studying the avifauna of Venezuela. To this he would add that the realization of his hopes worked out exactly as planned—except that it took him forty years instead of four!

In San Antonio, he fell in love with Miss Alicia Elvira Tucker, a young lady of British antecedents. Their engagement took his parents' generation by surprise, but William and Alicia were promptly married, and the first two children, John Prince and William Henry, Jr. (the ornithologist) were born at San Antonio de Maturín. A daughter, Luisa, and a third son, Alberto, completed the family in later years.

In 1903, he removed his headquarters to Caracas, where he diversified his occupation by becoming an agent and importer of manufactured articles. He also served as Venezuelan correspondent of the New York Herald, and later of the Associated Press. His firm was the first to bring American

motorcars to Venezuela, leading rapidly to a great extension of modern highways in the country. He likewise introduced the first means of refrigeration and cooking by gas and electricity, and ultimately the necessary apparatus for receiving messages by radio. He was a pioneer in installment selling, and the founder of cooperative and profit-sharing activities by which his large staff of employees achieved new and secure independence. All who consistently saved 10 per cent of their salaries would see that amount doubled by the proprietor. He also introduced the half-holiday Saturday into Venezuela.

With the growth of his sons and the consolidation of affairs in their hands, he became free to return more and more to his abiding interest. Through the establishment of the Phelps Foundation, he financed and participated in expeditions to all parts of Venezuela that were still remote and little known. These comprised the Paraguaná Peninsula, parts of the llanos and forested lowlands of the Orinoco system, the reaches of the Río Negro that all but anastomose with headwaters of the Orinoco, the Paria Peninsula that stretches almost to Trinidad, the Caribbean Islands, the Sierra de Perijá on the boundary with Colombia, the Andean projection in the southwest near Mérida, and the great massifs of isolated, flat-topped sandstone mountains, such as Guaiquinima, Roraima, and Auyantepui, which stand far from one another in the interior, relatively near the borders of Guyana or Brazil. Before the investigations of Phelps, knowledge of these areas had been mysterious and legendary. For the localities at sea he acquired and equipped the ketch-rigged yacht 'Ornis.'

On the Auyantepui Expedition, which was sponsored also by the American Museum of Natural History, he was accompanied by his son "Billy." It occupied four months, of which six weeks were spent on the previously unattained plateau of the mountain. This undertaking was a major achievement in logistics and engineering. It involved airplane and canoe travel, a long passage through wilderness inhabited by dubiously disposed Indians, and the all but impossible scaling of the straight-walled heights, which required construction of several dozen great chains of ladders. After the successful conclusion of this venture, the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History elected Dr. Phelps a Benefactor of the institution.

Altogether, the indefatigable explorer organized more than a hundred expeditions, great and small, and made possible the cooperation of many specialists from abroad. Followers of disciplines other than ornithology were by no means excluded. He welcomed the surveys of Dr. Charles B. Hitchcock, of the American Geographical Society, and furthered the botanical researches of Dr. Bassett Maguire, of the New York Botanical Garden.

Billy was his constant companion, with his daughter-in-law, Mrs. William H. Phelps, Jr., to whom he referred as "equal to the best man afield." "Kathy," as she is known to fellow-workers, not only prepared beautiful bird skins, but also excelled in charming and accurate watercolors of the species and their environment. In addition, she was a peerless hostess and sustainer of morale.

In 1938, Dr. Phelps retired from active business to devote his remaining years to ornithology and the continued growth of his museum and library pertaining to the 1,300 species of Venezuelan birds. Although at that date sixty-three years of age, he had lost little of his vigor. In fact, thirteen years later, I found him a hard competitor on the cactus-strewn rocky terrain of the Venezuelan islands. By the time of his death, his publications numbered more than seventy articles and a two-volume book, the last being the "Lista de las Aves de Venezuela con su Distribución Geográfica," of which his son was coauthor. Other papers were written with collaborators of many sources, such as Berlioz, Conover, Dugand, Gilliard, Schaefer, Sutton, Wetmore, and Zimmer. He collected and described as new some 219 forms of birds. Various birds, two mammals, a reptile, two fishes, and a genus of plants, described by admiring colleagues, bear his patronymic. *El Pico Phelps*, a 10,000-foot mountain of the Cerro de la Neblina, in the extreme south of the Republic, was also named for him by the discoverer. This marks the highest altitude in Venezuela outside the extension of the Andes in the southwest.

Honors, too numerous to list in full, were conferred on Dr. Phelps during the latter years of his long life. He was officially appointed by his own and neighboring South American nations, and by the United States, a representative to scientific congresses in Europe and the New World. In 1939, the President of Venezuela conferred upon him the Medal of Public Education in a ceremony marking the inauguration of the Society of Natural Sciences in a building which he had donated to the Society, fully furnished. In 1949 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Science from the Central University of Venezuela. In 1953, he was designated to occupy one of the numbered chairs (*Sillón XVIII*) of the Senate of the Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences, an honor transferred to his son William after his decease. It was the first occasion in the history of the Academy in which a father had been succeeded by his son. The Geoffroy St. Hilaire Gold Medal was conferred upon him by the Société Nationale d'Acclimatation de France in 1954, the Order of the Liberator (Bolívar) by the President of Venezuela in 1955, and the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union in the same year.

In 1947, after residing for half a century in Venezuela, Dr. Phelps be-

came a citizen of his adopted country, and gave a public library to the community of his first home, San Antonio de Maturín, the books as well as the building, and an endowment for maintenance.

His fame will endure as the one who accomplished the fundamental ornithological work in a country of astonishing richness, compared with temperate North America. Venezuela has 98 species of hummingbirds alone. The first task in such an area related to taxonomy and distribution of the fauna, so that order might be brought out of chaos. More sophisticated approaches to the study of bird life then became practicable. The exemplars of new disciplines, from the stroboscopic photography of hummingbirds by Greenewalt to Griffin's investigation of the sonar equipment of the *guácharo* (*Steatornis*), which nests in the total darkness of caves, were always welcome at the Phelps hospitable home in Caracas. Newcomers found that he had smoothed their paths to accomplishment.

Dr. Phelps was a handsome man into old age, and as erect as a ramrod. He expressed and commanded dignity in every walk of life, and yet he had a rollicking sense of humor. He liked to have his respected colleagues, even those much younger than himself, address him as "Bill." His Spanish was structurally impeccable, but always spoken with a slight accent that betrayed his origin. During his frequent sojourns in New York, he and Mona, a Danish lady who became his second wife six years after he had lost the mother of his children, and who died a few months before he did, delighted in gathering droves of younger friends for dinner and a merry evening. He had a somewhat quick and nervous manner, but he was prevailingly tolerant of all matters except those that he regarded as not quite forthright. He dedicated himself with zeal to every task that he entered. If he had any vices they "lean'd toward virtue's side" like those of the Vicar of Wakefield. He was loved and infinitely respected by his four children and a large coterie of other decendants, for he lived long enough to welcome his first great-great-grandchild.

Such a description may go far to explain how a youthful American could emigrate to a Latin country and by tact, courtesy, implicit honesty, and a noble ambition outside the work-a-day world, make himself enduringly welcome and abundantly successful. He contrived to avoid partisanship during the difficult political regime of his earlier years in Venezuela and found himself soundly established among friends and well-wishers in the happier period that followed.

The bibliography of William H. Phelps has been published by Ramón Aveledo in the *Boletín de la Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales* (Vol. 36, No. 110, pp. 3-11, 1966). This indicates that Dr. Phelps had set himself a clearly defined ornithological goal which he pursued with typical

energy and success. It was to amass an unrivaled collection of Venezuelan birds, to study these, and to publish a series of preliminary papers on the numerous additions to our knowledge of the systematics and distribution of all Venezuelan species, and finally to publish an authoritative checklist of the birds of that country. The first part of the checklist, that dealing with the Passeriformes, appeared in 1950, the Non-Passeriformes in 1958, and a revised and considerably augmented second edition of the Passeriformes in 1963. All of these checklists appeared as separate publications of the Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales, and all of them were in coauthorship with his son William H. Phelps, Jr.

*16 Sand Street, Stony Brook, Long Island, New York 11790.*