

PROFILES OF NEW ENGLAND ORNITHOLOGISTS:
JOSEPH A. HAGAR

by Bradford G. Blodget

Editor's Note. New England is a region rich in ornithological history, a history that continues to be made today, as some of this country's most noted ornithologists reside and work in the area. In the past, Bird Observer has published articles of notable ornithological figures. With this article, Bird Observer is pleased to continue our occasional "Profiles of New England Ornithologists." We are fortunate to welcome state ornithologist of Massachusetts, Bradford G. Blodget, as a contributor to this series. Fittingly, Brad writes about Joseph A. Hagar, who also held the position of state ornithologist.

Joseph A. "Archie" Hagar, born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on May 13, 1896, was a personal mentor of mine. During his long and fascinating career, Archie bridged the old school of "sportsmen ornithologists" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with what Griscom and others came to call the modern ornithologists from the 1940s to the present. Hagar knew Edward H. Forbush, A. C. Bent, William Brewster, C. J. Maynard, and other early ornithologists. He knew the old days of extensive scientific collecting when coastal shooting clubs, such as the Monomoy Brent Club, took shorebirds as well as ducks, and club members used live decoys and shorebird calls. Archie adeptly made the transition into the modern tradition and made important contributions to ornithology throughout his life.

Hagar graduated from the Massachusetts Agricultural College, now the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the Class of 1921. He was a founding member of the Manomet Bird Observatory and a trustee from 1970 until his death in 1989. He was the senior member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, having been a member continuously since his election in 1917. He served as the club's vice president from 1942 to 1950 and as a councilor in the years 1941-1942, 1950-1955, and 1972-1975.

E. H. Forbush retired as the Massachusetts state ornithologist in 1928 and was succeeded by John B. May from 1929-1933, and Hagar in 1934. Archie went on to hold the position in the Division of Fisheries and Game until his retirement in 1959. During his tenure as state ornithologist, he was unwittingly thrust into the political limelight, and he became a very controversial figure. From 1945 to 1950 he found himself in the midst of several great disputes, perhaps some of the stormiest in the history of the agency, concerning the federal taking of Plum Island and the creation of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. At the root of these disputes were concerns about the Black

Duck and how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intended to manage the refuge with the creation of impoundments and the impact such impoundments would have on wintering Black Ducks.

Archie was the champion of the maritime Black Duck. He possessed an unassailable depth of understanding of Black Duck biology. His analysis and interpretation of Black Duck banding data and his insight into the impact of management practices in the proposed refuge on wintering Black Duck populations was magnificent. It is not surprising that those who found themselves at odds with his beliefs and policies often resented him. He could grasp fundamental concepts concerning the Black Duck in its winter habitat that no one else at the time could understand.

Emerson Chandler, who worked under the direction of Hagar on a Black Duck banding program in the 1950s, wrote (personal communication):

Joseph Hagar was the champion of the coastal Black Duck population wintering in Massachusetts and of the hardy breed of waterfowlers who hunted them. Indeed, the academic community at times chastised the state ornithologist for his close association with the hunting fraternity. But it was natural for such an affinity to develop, since they shared a common understanding of the habits of the Black Duck on its coastal wintering grounds. Much of his contribution has been overshadowed by his disagreement with the policies and beliefs of the federal waterfowl managers in the late forties. Hagar knew the Black Ducks wintering along the Massachusetts coast to be as much a creature of the northern intertidal zone as its shellfish and saline vegetation. He correctly disputed food habit studies which failed to show the utter dependence of wintering Black Ducks on the animal food produced on the tidal flats. He recognized the immense importance of such marine areas and the counterproductive folly of converting coastal saltmarshes to freshwater habitats which would be locked in ice when food was most needed by the terminal wintering population.

He documented starvation losses occasionally caused by the extreme icing of the mussel beds in late winter and correctly disputed the claim that these losses resulted from lead poisoning. Most of all, he called for the management of the New England coastal Black Duck population based on its peculiar needs and not upon a conventional wisdom developed primarily in the management of puddle ducks originating in the prairie provinces of Canada.

Few would dispute today that Joseph A. Hagar understood our wintering coastal Black Duck population and its supporting ecosystem better than his contemporaries. Some would say that a posthumous apology is in order for failing to recognize his contribution earlier. I think Joe would feel more than vindicated if our future management plan for the Black Duck recognizes the ecological relationships he observed and acts to preserve a viable coastal wintering habitat that would send healthy Black Ducks back north to Quebec and Labrador and the Maritimes to breed each spring.

While the concerns of the Black Duck captured much of his professional career, Hagar was also an authority on shorebirds and wrote a classic paper on the Hudsonian Godwit demonstrating that the species was a common breeding bird in parts of central and northwestern subarctic Canada. It moves south down the western shores of the Hudson and James bays in large flocks and is not reported again in comparable numbers until it reaches wintering grounds in southern Argentina and Chile. The Massachusetts godwits are just the fringes of a great flight, not a rare species on the verge of extinction. Archie also described the breeding activities of Hudsonian Godwits on the nesting grounds and described, for the first time, the downy chicks.

In 1935 and 1936 he pioneered in studies of the impact of vehicles and other human activities on Least Terns. He also maintained a lifelong interest in raptors. From the late 1930s until the mid-1950s, he was puzzled by the failure of Peregrine eggs to hatch. With dismay, he watched the disappearance of the Peregrine Falcon from its historic eyries in the Commonwealth including the famous sites at Mount Sugarloaf, Mount Tom, and the Rattlesnake Ledges of Prescott in the old Swift River Valley. Of course, time revealed that this decline was tied to pesticides. In 1969 Archie published a now classic paper on the history of the Peregrine Falcon in Massachusetts. His last published contributions were accounts on the field identification of Swainson's Hawk and masterpieces detailing the migrations of the Swainson's and Broad-winged hawks found in Volume Five of Palmer's (1988) *Handbook of North American Birds*.

Archie was particularly adept at investigating field problems. One in particular that will be remembered forever was his successful explanation of New England's ornithological mystery bird known as the "kicker." For decades the bird was never seen well during its brief and unpredictable calling periods and arguments as to its identity raged for years. In 1901, Brewster attributed the call to a Black Rail. Others published accounts asserting it was actually a Yellow Rail. Hagar, in a brilliant paper before the Nuttall Ornithological Club in 1954, demonstrated that the kicker was neither, but was actually a Virginia Rail. A small number of Virginia Rails utter the kicker call, but the pattern of occurrence and frequency of these strange individuals remains a mystery. I was fortunate indeed to assist Archie with recording a kicker, the only one I've ever heard, at Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in 1969.

Archie's insightfulness and his ability to tie together fundamental concepts were never more clearly evident than his vision for Manomet Bird Observatory (taken from a promotional brochure for the Observatory):

Its premises, here condensed, were that environmental deterioration was becoming recognized as a major problem . . . that birds, by reason of their high metabolism, sensitivity to change, and short generations, might well

play a significant part in identifying environmental hazards . . . that their value as indicators of environmental change depended on the existence, before the changes occurred, of a well-planned bank of information against which the changes can be measured . . . and that birds, because of their bright colors, their songs, and their ubiquitous presence, were an extremely effective medium for leading people to an interest in general ecology, and thus by degrees, to a perception of their own relationship to the natural world.

Archie Hagar was a veritable fountain of knowledge and scientific integrity. In the last months of his life, I shared with Archie pictures of the nesting Peregrines in Boston's Custom House Tower and Bald Eagles in the Quabbin Reservation. In his quiet, short-spoken way he replied with a twinkle in his eye, "That's nice."

Joseph A. Hagar, 93, died in his home in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts, on December 17, 1989.

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