

LUDLOW GRISCOM: THE BIRDWATCHER'S GURU

by William E. Davis, Jr.

Ludlow Griscom is a legendary figure in the history of ornithology and birdwatching in Massachusetts. His major role in the early twentieth century shift from the "shotgun" to "binocular" school of ornithology and enormous influence on the development of birdwatching as a sport and hobby are well known and have been extensively chronicled by many of those who were the direct beneficiaries of Griscom's expertise (especially Roger Tory Peterson). Certainly, Ludlow Griscom was responsible, more than any other single individual, for the development of the technique of rapid identification of birds in the field. His Master's Thesis at Cornell University in 1915 on the identification of the eastern North American Anatidae (primarily ducks) is a classic, and gave an early indication of the leadership he was to provide the ornithological and birding community during the first half of the twentieth century. Griscom was also a teacher of methods of rapid identification of birds in the field and played that role throughout his career. Perhaps because he was a museum biologist (Research Curator of Birds, the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University) rather than a college professor, discussion of Griscom's contributions have not focused on his influence as a teacher.

In the following retrospective, I have relied heavily on interviews that I conducted with Griscom's contemporaries and protégés. The interviews deal with a broad spectrum of his activities as a teacher of the field identification of birds and proponent of the sport and hobby of birdwatching.

Ludlow Griscom had little formal practice teaching ornithology. He taught summer school at the University of Virginia while he was a graduate student at Cornell, and his only other opportunity to present a formal course in ornithology was in the Harvard summer school program. He made the most of this latter opportunity in the summers of 1935 and 1936, when he taught a six-week course in ornithology. It met every day during the week and featured a day-long field trip each weekend. In an April 12, 1935, letter to Mrs. Delabarre Fordyce, Ludlow described his course:

The main object of this course will be to give the beginner some acquaintance with a certain number of species of birds in life by means of a series of field trips and the lectures will take up the various phases of the life history and activities of birds. The course is not a technical one and there will be no anatomy, dissections, or studies in classification.

As far as preparation is concerned, it would be advisable if you had Chapman's Handbook, Peterson's recently-issued and most excellent Guide, a pair of good field glasses, and some outing clothes, and a



Ludlow Griscom

Photo courtesy of MAS

willingness to start early in the morning, and if necessary, to get your feet wet. The course is, of course, designed for people who have had no training in biology at all.

Judging from the comments from several people who took the course, Griscom made ornithology interesting. Tudor Richards, a Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC) member and former executive director of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, remarked in 1982 that the course had been very good and that he still had the notes nearly fifty years later. Juliet French, a student in the course, said that Griscom was an impressive teacher:

It took just one lecture to get me sold. He was a very stimulating person, he looked sort of fascinating, he wore a scarf because he had just had a slight operation on his throat. He had such a command of the English language and he was so definite, what he said was right, there was no questioning it. . . He spoke with such innate authority, and had a very good sense of humor. He would give a lot of

anecdotes, and I think that you could have heard a pin drop—everyone was so wrapped up in what he was saying.

Griscom did not like to read lectures: "It has been my avid practice for many years to give lectures on the basis of a topical outline and not read a manuscript out loud." French and David L. Garrison, another summer school student, became favorites of Griscom, and after the course was over he often invited them along on his birding excursions. They both became Griscom protégés, and he was responsible for both of them becoming staff members at the New England Museum of Natural History. (Ludlow was on the Board of Directors of the Boston Society of Natural History, which operated the museum. The museum evolved in the early 1950s into the present Boston Museum of Science.) The course was discontinued in 1937 because of financial difficulties with the Harvard summer school program, a consequence, in all probability, of the Great Depression.

Griscom's greatest influence came not from classroom activities, but from the innumerable field trips that he led and the dozens of people who learned field identification of birds under his direction. R. Dudley Ross gave the following eulogy, which was later published by the Linnaean Society of New York:

His influence will continue to be felt throughout the length and breadth of the continent—through the many disciples whom he initiated into the mysteries of field ornithology, many of whom have become accomplished and prominent professionals. These graduates of the Griscom school have in turn passed on their knowledge to others so that a veritable groundswell has reached many who never met or even saw Griscom.

The comments made by individuals who learned their field identification skills from Griscom are remarkably consistent in their praise of him. His influence on the youngsters was considerable; one young man even carried a picture of Griscom in his wallet.

A letter sent to me from Theodore L. Eliot, Jr. relates two anecdotes that give some insight into the Griscom style of teaching:

In October, 1947 (. . . it may have been November) I was in Newburyport birding with a fellow Nuttall member, the late Ben Keenan. We stopped in town for a bowl of chowder and ran into Ludlow Griscom. He told us to go to Marblehead to a certain address where we would find something interesting in a certain tree—if we hurried. We did hurry and found a Painted Redstart. We were impressed that he did not tell us ahead of time what we were going to see.

On another occasion in the spring of '47 (I was 19), I stood with him and some others looking at the Newburyport Harbor mudflats. There

was a dull, largish shorebird there. I didn't know what it was. He said that if I wanted to learn this bird I should flush it. That required a really difficult, slogging walk of fifteen minutes up to my knees (it seemed) in mud. The result was my first Willet, and I have never forgotten that bird and have since always enjoyed the beauty of a Willet's wing pattern in flight. Yes, Ludlow Griscom was a great teacher.

Sibley Higginbotham, an NOC member and frequent birding companion of Griscom's, commented on Griscom's "teaching in the field" style:

We were out on the plowed fields in Newburyport, probably the best place in the state for longspurs and buntings. It was characteristic of the way he approached something. "Take a look at that Horned Lark." I did and he said, "What strikes you about that?" It had a white supercilary stripe . . . He said, "Yeah, it does. Do you notice anything else? Would you say looking at that bird and the others there, it looks a bit big to you?" And I said, "Yes, it does." He had an almost absolute ability, like perfect pitch, an absolute ability to judge size, and the lark was bigger. He would draw you out, he always wanted other people along, sometimes testing you, teaching you too . . .

Ruth Emery, the original Voice of Audubon and one of the most revered of Massachusetts' birders, suggested that Ludlow was a bit intimidating at first. Nevertheless, Ruth became a frequent birding companion of Griscom.

The first time I ever went out with him, Mr. Mason [executive director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society] was with him. Margaret [Argue] and I went. I was terrified to open my mouth. Down in Newburyport, around the haystacks coming out of Rowley, I saw a hawk sitting out over the marsh. I was afraid to call it in fear it might be a crow. But when we got by it, I said, "There was a hawk back there," and he said, "Why didn't you say so?" So he said, "Back up Russell," and we backed up and there was a Rough-legged Hawk. He said, "That's good, that's my first one of the season." I perked up a bit.

On the north end of Plum Island, Margaret and I didn't know what we were looking at, and we described it and Griscom said, "Did it have a surprised look on its face?", and we said yes, it did, and he said, "That was a White-eyed Vireo" . . .

Ludlow had established a reputation for field identification that complemented his considerable taxonomic, "museum" study skin abilities. As a result, his correspondence is dotted with letters asking him for help in identification, including letters from Arthur C. Bent asking for identification of sandpipers, from Witmer Stone asking for tips on identifying Forster's and Roseate terns in life, and from the bird painter Allan Brooks asking

identification assistance on Seaside Sparrows. As the guru of field identification, he was constantly being asked for advice on field-related matters, such as the best binoculars to use.

Griscom was a prolific lecturer. The series of eight lectures which he gave at the Lowell Institute in January 1944 were widely acclaimed and became the basis of his book, *Modern Bird Study* (1945, Harvard University Press). He was frequently asked to talk to bird clubs and was a particular favorite of the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), as the following 1945 letter to Griscom from C. Russell Mason, executive director of the MAS, illustrates:

Our Annual Meeting Committee held a conference today and decided unanimously that you should be on our program on January 25. I am telling you their decision at the start of the letter, because I figure that you will probably protest on account of having been on the program last year and the year before. However, the expression of the Committee was that Ludlow Griscom should be a permanent feature of all our Annual Meeting programs. So you can see that there is real demand for whatever you have to offer us.

When the *Bulletin of New England Bird Life* was established in 1936 by the Boston Society for Natural History and later carried on by the MAS as *Records of New England Birds*, Griscom provided direction for the journal, and his protégés compiled this tally of regional bird sightings. French, then Juliet Richardson was the first editor, and Garrison, Roland Clement, Ruth Turner, Annette and William Cottrell, Emery, Donald Alexander, Henry Parker, Ruth Higginbotham, and James Baird followed as editors. All were intimately connected with Griscom.

Ludlow Griscom had a strong influence over the years on Harvard University students who constituted the Harvard Ornithological Club (HOC). Griscom was the freshman advisor to many, but known to all through his contribution to the club's activities. He took many of the HOC members into the field with him, not only on his day trips through Essex County, but also to Cape Cod and its specialty, Monomoy. Richard Hinchman recalled:

Some of Griscom's brusqueness was his sense of humor, some was teasing. If someone made a superficial remark, Ludlow didn't hesitate to express his feelings, but he wanted to teach, he would explain field marks, he was a good teacher, he'd run the legs off us even though we were twenty years younger.

The Harvard graduates to whom Griscom was freshman advisor include Norman Hill, who would, after Griscom's death in 1959, compile Griscom's field notes into *The Birds of Cape Cod, Massachusetts* (1965, William Morrow, New York), and Chandler S. Robbins, the noted field guide author and biologist. According to Hill, Griscom was always available for advice and was kind and patient. Chandler remembers Griscom as the most frequent speaker at the HOC

meetings, providing perhaps twenty-five percent of the evening programs. Griscom was always flexible, saying "What do you want me to talk about?" He routinely gave a summary of the season, as he did at the NOC, and, although he did not use slides, his talks were generally well received. Robbins recalled the only time that he disagreed with Griscom was on a winter boat trip. Griscom said, "What was that?" and Robbins answered, "I think it was a Red-breasted Merganser." Griscom said, "It was a Dovekie!" Fortunately, they had been looking at different birds.

The HOC members were for the most part more than happy to put up with the Griscom brusqueness and tendency to dogmatic pronouncements. Griscom was affectionately christened, The Great God Gristlebottom, by the members.

Theodore L. Eliot, Sr. wrote to me about the self-assurance and instant identification skills that characterized Griscom, as well as his habit of looking at every bird, watching a flock long after everyone else had given up. Griscom taught by example.

Sometime in the mid-'30s on a Christmas Count, a group of NOC members stood on a cold December afternoon gazing at the frozen Newbury marsh when suddenly, about 300 yards away, two ducks rose from a saltwater ditch and before any of us could raise a binocular the birds, within two or three seconds disappeared into a parallel ditch. "Shovelers" said Ludlow. "Aw! come on Ludlow" was the general outcry. "Well, if you don't believe it then go out there and take a look" was the reply. Three of us non-believers trudged out there, flushed the birds, and—you guessed it, they were shovelers.

On a spring morning in the '30s I was with a group of birders along with Ludlow and we had a flock of peeps under observation along the beach leading from Revere to Nahant. They were semipalmated sandpipers and semipalmated plovers. I remember we all, except Ludlow, stopped looking at the flock. Shortly, still looking through his binoculars he said: "I'm almost certain there's a Wilson's plover in that flock. Yes, that's what it is. Will someone get my gun out of the car; I want to collect it." The Wilson's was duly dispatched.

Perhaps the most famous of the HOC members, S. Dillon Ripley, an ornithological expert on the Indian subcontinent and former secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, related some recollections of Griscom in the field. The last paragraph of his recollections perhaps reveals the most important element which any teacher can hope to impart—a lasting personal memory and impression. This statement highlights Ludlow Griscom as a teacher.

I went out with him several times in the winter of 1940-41 and found him amusing and intelligent, but fascinatingly didactic on bird sightings. A gray early morning with heavy mist and near-zero visibility was no preventive from his loud pronouncement of

"Mourning Dove" as a distant shape hurried away, virtually unknownst to the rest of the straining-eyed crew. (Mourning doves were most uncommon then in New England winters.) No matter.

I remember the famous Clay-colored Sparrow which hung about in a bush near the road north towards Ipswich, discovered by Ludlow. We joked about it during its visitation, saying that Ludlow had had it tethered to a bush there as his object lesson.

I had only one minor triumph with Ludlow on a cold winter morning. He could not recognize a distant anonymous waterfowl sitting in the middle of a pond. Lying on our stomachs, I did my best and came up with "Gadwall female" and Ludlow agreed. I felt a warm sense of satisfaction which I have not forgotten.

WILLIAM E. (TED) DAVIS, JR., president of Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts, Inc., teaches at Boston University. He has recently completed a biography, *Ludlow Griscom, Ornithologist, Conservationist, and "Dean of the Birdwatchers."* The book is being published by the Smithsonian Institution Press and is scheduled for release in late 1993 or early 1994. The letters of Fordyce and Mason are archived in the Ludlow Griscom Papers in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at the Cornell University library. Ted is grateful for permission to publish excerpts from the letters.

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