

HE SPANNED TWO ERAS: CHARLES FOSTER BATCHELDER, LAST OF THE "SHOTGUN" ORNITHOLOGISTS

by William E. Davis, Jr.

Charles Foster Batchelder was born before the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* changed biological perspective around the world and launched evolution as the guiding paradigm of biology. Change came slowly to ornithology — never a cutting-edge field of biological endeavor until nearly the middle of the twentieth century — and Batchelder grew up and matured in a world in which ornithology largely involved collecting specimens and naming new species (and, after Darwinian thought had destroyed the constraining notion of the fixity of species, describing geographic races or subspecies). Biogeography — the study of the distribution of species — was in its infancy, genetics was still the well-kept secret of Gregor Mendel, and ecology as a scientific discipline did not exist. Conservation was not a priority, if it was considered at all: nature was still viewed as bountiful and limitless, the disappearance of the Dodo and the Great Auk, and a number of other blemishes notwithstanding. Ornithology was in its infancy and inextricably intertwined with hobby collecting of bird skins, nests, and eggs.

Charles Foster Batchelder was born on July 20, 1856, at 7 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, adjacent to Harvard Yard, and he resided there until his death in 1954. As a boy Batchelder loved to roam the fields and woodlands of then-rural Cambridge, and as a teenager he made the acquaintance of like-minded neighbors, including William Brewster, Henry Henshaw, and Ruthven Deane, who were about five years his senior. These acquaintances and friendships naturally led to his joining, in 1877, the fledgling Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC), which had been founded by William Brewster, Henry Purdie, W.E.D. Scott, Ruthven Deane, and several others in 1873. The Club was named after Thomas Nuttall, for a time at Harvard University and the author of a handbook of North American ornithology that appeared in two volumes in the 1830s. It was the first organization in North America devoted exclusively to birds. For the rest of his life, the fortunes of Batchelder and the NOC were closely interwoven.

The young men who constituted the NOC took their ornithology very seriously, and during the late nineteenth century its practice was most certainly of the "shotgun school" variety. There were no field guides to aid in the identification of live birds and no binoculars worthy of the name. Identification was made by shooting a bird and then keying it out from one of the standard references. An interest in adult and immature plumages, molts, and plumage variations required the collection of a series of study skins for each species of bird. There were few museum collections available for bird study, so each individual made his (there were virtually no women involved) own collection

with much trading of duplicates among friends — the element of biological “stamp collecting” was certainly present among some of the practitioners, although most emphasized the scientific aspects. The thrill of the chase, the excitement of finding a rarity, the pleasures of being outdoors, and the aesthetics of nature, are elements still shared by the birdwatchers of today, but in the nineteenth century identification was made over the barrel of a shotgun.

Batchelder attended Harvard University, graduating with an A.B. degree in 1878, and a civil engineering degree from the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in 1882. After graduation he spent nearly a year collecting birds in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and California (Taber 1958). During this period, and on subsequent trips to Europe and California, he was in constant communication with William Brewster, and his letters provide some insight into shotgun ornithology. Two letters of March 1883 from Batchelder to Brewster highlight the lack of a conservation perspective:

One of my principal objects in going to San Diego was to look for *Passereulus rostratus*. I found him, and secured five specimens, though in the attempt I sacrificed about twenty of the common *Passereuli*. Which are they, by the way, *P. alandinus* and [or] *P. anthinus*?

Then Batchelder responded to Brewster’s return letter:

Yours [letter] of the 15th is just received and your information about *P. anthinus* [one of the Savannah Sparrow subspecies complex] makes me very mournful. I had no idea that it was so valuable. At San Diego, after I had made a few skins, whenever I shot one by accident I used to chuck it away in disgust. They swarmed on every side in the salt marshes. I frequently heard two or three singing at once, and I think I could have gotten fifty in a day if I had tried. I think if I had waited a little longer — I left on March 5 — I could probably have got its nest . . . I enjoyed my stay there and added about ten species to my collection. We spent three or four days camping in the San Bernadino Mts. and had the pleasure of seeing three California Condors though we didn’t succeed in getting even a shot at them.

Bird were shot while nesting, often in preference to at other times of the year, as a September 30, 1886, letter from Batchelder to Brewster attests:

I sympathize with you as to spring migration collecting. It seems to me to be almost a waste of time to shoot and skin spring migrants, provided they are species that can be obtained on the breeding grounds. Specimens taken in migration are practically worthless for comparisons, and I, for one, have come to look upon the spring

migration as one of the worst — instead of the best — times for collecting.

Batchelder returned from his western collecting trip and took a job as an engineer for Boston Bridge Works. Apparently ill-health, which plagued him during much of his early life, led to his quitting work and traveling to Europe to recover. He never again was regularly employed, and he divided his time among the NOC, Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), and the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), and he was later quoted as saying, "The serious study of natural history has been my principal pursuit" (*Boston Globe* 1954). He married in 1895, acquired a summer estate in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and thereafter divided his time between Cambridge and New Hampshire. He was characterized by Oliver Austin, Jr. (April 1, 1957, letter) as "the country squire in Peterborough, still planting trees in his 80s!"

His involvement in NOC affairs (as Vice President in 1878-1879, and editorial responsibilities for the *Bulletin* of the NOC, the first journal of ornithology in North America) launched him into national prominence in 1883 when NOC members William Brewster and J.A. Allen, and Honorary Member Elliott Coues sent out invitations to prominent ornithologists nationally for a meeting at the American Museum of Natural History in New York for the purpose of creating a national ornithological organization. Batchelder received an invitation and thus became one of the founding members of the AOU. The AOU took over the *Bulletin*, editor and all, and its subscription list, and made it the organ of the AOU, *The Auk*. Clearly, a core of NOC members, together with the Club's Corresponding membership (that included virtually all prominent North American ornithologists) had established a national organization, and this upheaval nearly led to the extinction of the NOC (Davis 1987). Batchelder remained active in AOU affairs throughout much of his life, serving as Vice President from 1900-1905 and President from 1905-1908. As President he was a permanent member of Council and served from 1891 until his death in 1954. He had become the last remaining Founder of the AOU.

Early on, Batchelder expressed reservations about some of the more vocal of the bird protectionists who were threatening to curtail bird collecting as well as the horrendous slaughter associated with the millinery trade and market gunning. In a February 9, 1887, letter to Brewster, he states his opinion forcefully:

It is better in my opinion to have the ranks [of Active Members of the AOU] full than to have plenty of room for pushing aspirants like Dutcher [presumably William Dutcher, a driving force in the establishing a national Audubon movement] or even Coale — we don't want noisy ignoramuses to bring discredit on the Union, and as

long as there are many vacant places there will be danger of such men getting into them, no matter how severe a sifting machine we have.

Batchelder donated his large collection of birds and mammals to the MCZ in 1933, and in 1934 he was named an Associate in Mammalogy and Ornithology, a title which he retained until his death, with the exception of the period 1942-1948, when he was a Research Fellow in Mammalogy and Ornithology.

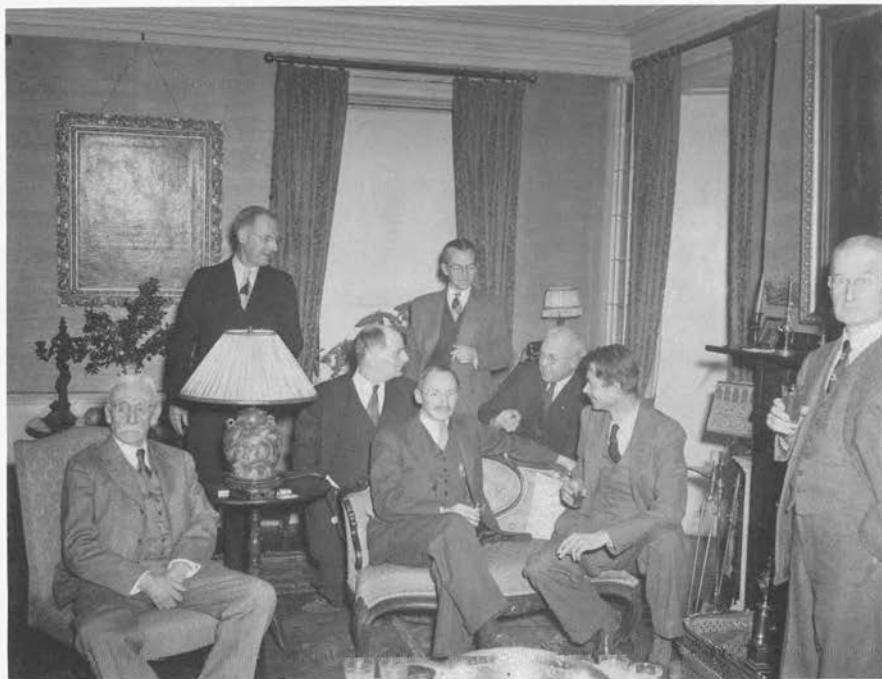
Batchelder dabbled in botany, but continued his interest in birds and mammals throughout his life. His published work in science was modest. Of 77 titles in his bibliography, 33 were reviews of books or other literature, and more than half of his publications did not exceed a page or two. As a scientist he was a dilettante. His major contribution was perhaps as an editor. He helped edit the NOC *Bulletin* during its short life, and was an Associate Editor of *The Auk* from 1888-1893. He was a founder of the New England Zoological Club, which existed solely as an outlet for the rapid publication of scientific papers of its members through the *Proceedings* of the Club. Batchelder edited these *Proceedings* from 1898-1947 — almost a half-century! He was the editor for many of the NOC Memoir series of publications, and Oliver Austin, Jr. wrote (April 1, 1957, letter) about his editorial skills:

I also remember him, most gratefully, as the man who taught me more about writing than I learned in all the English comp courses I took at Wesleyan and Harvard, and who showed me, oh so gently and nicely and diplomatically, just how a manuscript should be. As I look back at it, I think I did more work on 'The Birds of Newfoundland-Labrador' after he started editing it than I did before I presented it to Harvard as my PhD thesis! [published as Memoir VII by the NOC].

Perhaps Batchelder's most substantial contribution to ornithology came from his immense involvement with the NOC. He served the Club as Treasurer from 1880-1930 — a half century of service. For about thirty years (roughly 1920-1950) "Batch" provided a home for NOC meetings, along with the gracious hospitality for which he is still remembered. He often invited selected NOC members for dinner prior to the meetings, provided accommodations for members coming long distances, and hosted the annual New Year's celebration, featuring a rum punch which became legendary. Oliver Austin's comments (April 1, 1957, to Wendell Taber) underscore Batchelder's contributions to the NOC:

I'll always remember Batch as he was when I knew him back in the late 20's, as the friendly but proper and ultra-conservative host of the N.O.C. in the house on Kirkland Street, back in the days when the NOC was something; and, in essence and spirit, the NOC was CFB & vice-versa. What meetings those were! . . . dignified and correct, yes,

but lively, stimulating, and no end of fun. Batch never took a prominent part in the discussions, but somehow his presence set the whole tone. He was always there — in the background, yes — but there, and his was the last word in all matters of policy.



January 1948 annual meeting of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, at the home of Charles F. Batchelder. Left to right: Charles F. Batchelder, Arthur Argue (standing), Wendell Taber, James L. Peters (sitting), Maurice C. Emery (standing), Joseph A. Hager, Charles H. Blake, and Morton Cummings (holding a glass of Batchelder's famous rum punch). A New Year's party was celebrated at the annual meeting. Photograph courtesy of the Nuttall Ornithology Club.

Batchelder's most important publications involved the NOC. His only two books, *Nuttall Ornithological Club 1873-1919* (1937), and *A Bibliography of William Brewster* (1951), were Memoirs VIII and X, respectively, of the NOC Memoir series. His other principal publication was a bibliography of the writings of early Club member C.J. Maynard (1951).

Batchelder lived long enough to see the shotgun era of American ornithology largely replaced by the one of observation of the living bird, but it is clear that he was not entirely happy with the change. When James Lee Peters, Curator of Birds at the MCZ and President of the NOC since 1942, died in 1952, Batchelder feared that the NOC as he had known and loved it had come to an end. He was largely correct, since Ludlow Griscom, a strong advocate of binocular ornithology and the birdwatcher's guru, succeeded Peters as President

of the NOC. Comments in his 1937 history of the NOC suggest that his heart was in the ornithology of his early years. He clearly glorified the days of yore, as the following two excerpts show:

It should not be forgotten that in those days a hunting dog was very apt to be found a member of the household of any active ornithologist, for there seldom was much of a dividing line between ornithologists and sportsmen. Few were the ornithologists who, in season, did not turn keenly to the pursuit of game-birds, and it was only the dullest-witted sportsmen whose eyes and guns were not directed instinctively toward any strange bird that appeared on the horizon. The virility and hardiness demanded and developed in the rough avocations of the sportsman unquestionably helped make the ornithologist of the time better fitted to meet with equanimity the fatigue, the hardship, and the risks that constantly fell to the lot of the pioneer naturalist.

The scientific egg collectors of those days were endowed with qualities that deserve much respect. Keen observation, untiring patience, endurance of hardship and danger to life and limb, were theirs. . . . I know of no training for a young naturalist equal to that of serious egg-collecting.

Batchelder then discussed the anticollecting movement that developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, and in a second excerpt makes clear his view of binocular-based ornithology — ending, however, on an upbeat note:

The rising tide of bird protection that began in the middle 'eighties had far-reaching effects on ornithology and, inevitably on the Club. The movement at first was not without some fanatical leaders, loudly vocal . . . turned their attention especially to that more shining mark, the scientific collector . . . The hysteria aroused among the more emotional of the uninformed public was extraordinary, and under the breaking storm the more timid of the ornithologists laid away their guns. . . .

In such an atmosphere as this it was natural for many new-comers into ornithology to content themselves with the opera-glass. Modern field-glasses were yet to be, but it was a way of approach to the subject that drew an increasing number of amateurs. Some of them doubtless would have found collecting too strenuous. The exacting labor of preparing good bird-skins, especially after a hard day in the field, called for men of serious purpose. Though indolence, of course, was a factor, some of the new recruits unquestionably were greatly

influenced in their choice of method by the spreading opposition to the taking of bird-life.

“Opera-glass” observers, whose experience had given them self-confidence, laid their reports before the older members who were used to seeing the evidence in hand. The latter’s wholesome skepticism had an educative effect on some of the new school; others failed to profit. Meanwhile those who were accustomed to ‘proof by the gun’ began to take up the improved field-glasses that soon were being made, and to discover, a little to their surprise, how much might be learned without a gun.

Charles Foster Batchelder had a long and interesting life, beginning before Darwin’s famous book began biology as we know it today and ending after Watson and Crick had unlocked the genetic secrets of DNA coding. The changes that occurred in ornithology were nearly as profound, and he was witness to them all.

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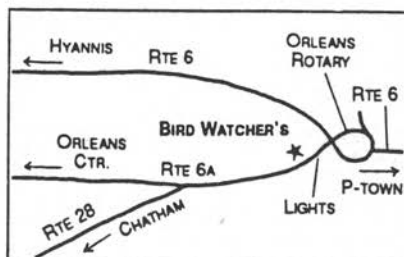
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