

ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

(Bird Observer continues its series celebrating some of the books that have inspired, delighted, or enlightened some of our regular book reviewers.)

My Favorite Bird Books

By Brian Cassie

Louis Halle wrote, "The appreciation of birds, indeed the appreciation of all phenomena of spring, cannot be dissociated from the accumulations of memory. The appearance of a familiar bird immediately awakens a train of forgotten associations, and this makes each spring transcend its predecessor . . . The bird, or the event, must have a background to be appreciated, but not necessarily the background of one's individual memory alone, important as this is. It is the great function of nature, literature and art to teach us to see these things, for the beauty of an object, a song, or a dance can never be altogether intrinsic, independent of old associations and acquired understanding." It was these words, and similar sentiments expressed by Charlton Ogburn, that inspired me to experience as many birds as I can in nature and through the literature.

My real interest in birds developed when I was home recuperating from mononucleosis, during the winter of my freshman year in college. From the kitchen window of our home near the center of Orleans, I made my first acquaintance with the Tufted Titmouse, Downy Woodpecker, Evening Grosbeak, Song Sparrow, and a good many other birds that I had managed to overlook for the first eighteen years of my life. I identified those Cape Cod yard birds with John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, with text notes by Ludlow Griscom. In a house full of books of all kinds, it was the only bird book we owned. I am sure many of you are familiar with this book, with its covers decorated with bird feathers. I can honestly say I have no great sentimental attachment to this volume, and I more or less shelved it in short order in favor of the then-current field guides by Peterson, Robbins, and Pough. In time, my passion for birds grew, as did my library, and now, some 3000 birds and a few thousand books later, I have been asked to pick out the books that inspired me to spend the last twenty-seven years watching birds. I think I can do it.

If you have ever seen my library, I am quite sure you would deduce that my favorite books are Roger Tory Peterson's bird guides. I have a rather complete collection of editions and printings of the various titles, in English and a number of other languages. I am enormously grateful to Mr. Peterson for all he did for the cause of conservation — of birds, butterflies, and all living things — and I have had a fun time collecting his field guides (although my wife, Sarah Jane, says fifty copies of a single title, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, is enough). But you

would have to look on the shelf beneath these field guides to find the two titles that take pride of place in my collection: the books that inspired me to make nature and birds part of my life and soul. I present them together, for they are written by two men with remarkably similar backgrounds and remarkable literary abilities.

In the 1930s, two fellows graduated from Harvard University and went on to careers in the State Department. Along the way, Louis J. Halle spent time in the Coast Guard, while Charlton Ogburn, Jr. was an officer in combat in World War II. I have no idea if they ever met. Mr. Halle eventually took a professorship at the University of Virginia. Among his books is *Birds Against Men*, for which he won the John Burroughs Medal for the best American nature writing of the year. Mr. Ogburn also took up writing, and he, too, won the John Burroughs medal, for *The Winter Beach*. These are fabulous books, to be sure, but the titles they wrote that stoked the fires within me were *Spring in Washington* and *The Adventure of Birds*, by Halle and Ogburn, respectively. *Spring in Washington* is eloquent; *The Adventure of Birds* is delightful. The only thing I can meaningfully say about them is that reading them changed my life. I came across each by chance and I pass them on to you by choice. There are none better.

The Adventure of Birds, by Charlton Ogburn, Jr. New York, NY. William Morrow. 1975. *The Winter Beach*, by Charlton Ogburn, Jr. New York, NY. William Morrow. 1966. *Spring in Washington*, by Louis J. Halle. New York, NY. Harper and Brothers. 1947. *Birds Against Men*, by Louis J. Halle. New York, NY. 1938.

Brian Cassie has long been a prominent member of the Massachusetts natural-history community. A Foxboro resident, Brian is a past president of the Massachusetts Butterfly Club and serves on the Board of Directors of the North American Butterfly Association.

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