



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie



In the previous issue of EBBA News so much space was given to "The Handbook of North American Birds" edited by Ralph Palmer that its comparison as a new series with the well-known series by the late Arthur Cleveland Bent had to wait until now.

There were even other comprehensive surveys of North American birds before Bent: those by Bonaparte and Wilson, by Charles Barney Cory, by Bendire, and by Ridgway. Volume I by Ridgway was published in 1901 and the series was never completed. Bent's series is not yet completed, yet the Palmer series is well under way. This indicates a frantic effort to keep up to date, and results in a regrettable omission of the Fringillidae.

The first volume in the Bent series was "Life Histories of North American Diving Birds" which was issued by the Government Printing Office in Washington in 1919. There may be a few other old timers in EBBA who were fortunate as I was in obtaining this and the subsequent nineteen volumes free for nothing. For later generations there may be some consolation in the fact that Dover Publications in New York has put out reprints of the two volumes on Birds of Prey and of the two volumes on Shore Birds. (Possibly others.) These reprints are in paper covers, but so were the original publications. My copy of Gulls and Terns succumbed to utter collapse from hard usage so that I had to have it rebound in hard covers.

It was evidently the aim of A. C. Bent to collect all the known, pertinent information about each species in the check list. Not only did an S. O. S. go forth requesting information, but the author searched assiduously through all the available literature with the result that the section on a given species may run to twenty pages or more.

For each species the same general outline is followed. First there may be a consideration of the name. In some cases Bent doesn't like the name in common use and tells why. He explains why names like McGillivray and Blackburn are attached to warblers. Then comes a section on Spring, followed by Nesting, Young, Plumages, Food, Behavior, Voice, Enemies, Field Marks, and Fall. In a final section concerned with Distribution, the breeding and winter ranges are given, with dates of migration, egg dates, casual records. The later volumes include banding records.

You might wonder why it was thought advisable to start another series before this one was complete. Nothing, however, is static in this

world, least of all birds. Their ranges, for example, are constantly in a state of flux. Also, a tremendous amount of detail has recently been discovered about plumage changes, as well as about other phases of avian activity such as song. So, if you belong to the ornithological elite, you may consider Bent's Life Histories narrowly dated.

In my opinion, however, there will never be another series reading as interestingly and containing such a wealth of intimate detail, short of an ornithological Britannica. Let me give an example of the way I use these Life Histories. While musing on parula warblers I wonder what individuals of this species do if there is no usnea moss handy with which to build their nests. Are they absolutely limited in range by this ecological detail? In Bent I find the answer: To a great extent parulas have disappeared from areas where they formerly nested because the lichen is no longer to be found. Yet there are regions where usnea is scarce or absent where parulas manage with other nesting materials.

In the back of each Bent volume a complete bibliography is listed, followed by a section of black and white photographs. Bibliographies are soon out of date, and illustrations today can be vastly superior to those of the past. But there's still value in these two sections. And any time you want some really entertaining reading, turn to Bent. The text makes you feel as if you had actually lived with a given species for days and made discoveries yourself.

There are rumors that the final volume in the Bent series will eventually be published. I feel very much handicapped by not possessing any reference dealing exclusively with Fringillidae. Not only have the former various series dealt with warblers, but separate volumes on warblers have been published. Yet sparrows and finches have been neglected. The most valuable information I have encountered about these groups was gained at the EBBA meeting this past June, in the workshop group conducted by Dr. Swinebroad. Such information needs to be made more readily available.

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