



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie

The current year started with Margaret Morse Nice's "Studies in the Life History of the Song Sparrow," and it was your editor's intention to continue through the year with various life histories. However, the March-April issue of EBBA News was devoted entirely to workshop articles and our faithful cooperators, Michael Thomas and Grace C. Meleney have contributed to this issue. It is still our plan to include more life histories, but we urge and invite any of you to upset the schedule with unsolicited survey of pertinent publications.

Mr. Thomas' two contributions are most timely. At the recent EBBA meeting Bob Yunick conducted a workshop session in which he talked about decoys and exhibited some that he uses. They are designed solely for the purpose of attracting live birds to netting areas. Then on Saturday evening Dottie Mendenhall showed slides of carved wooden decoys that were featured in an exhibit held recently in Chestertown, Maryland.

Miss Meleney's review is timely, also, in that it contains suggestions for vacation areas of interest to the bird watcher.

Two articles have appeared in EBBA News describing the success that banders have had using decoys. (Raymond Bubb's "Wooden Shore Bird Decoys," EBBA News 26(4), 158(1963), and Robert Yunick's "Making and Using Shorebird silhouette decoys," EBBA News 28(I), 7(1965).) It is clear that shore bird decoys will find a host of new users, people armed with nets not guns. Since I suffer from that terrible affliction "collector's disease," my interest was aroused by the articles, not primarily I have to confess by the netting techniques described, but by the decoy making techniques. The articles raised the possibility that what has been described as "a fascinating, unique, and indigenous American folk art" would gain new admirers, and perhaps create new interest in the decoy maker's art.

My collecting disease can be treated only by frequent visits to junk shops and brimful country barns. Three years ago I came across an antique duck decoy--a Bluebill--and it was a genuine piece of folk art. The shape, the expression and the coloring of the duck carried both the "gizz" as Eliot Howard called it, of the bird, but also of the anonymous carver. Ever since then, I have had binoculars at the ready, ready to peer into any likely cache of decoys, and this interest has been further stimulated by a recently published book "The Art of the Decoy" by Adele Earnest, published by Clarkson Potter at \$10.

Those of you who have watched and banded birds on Long Island may already know of Mrs. Earnest, for she owns the Stony Point Folk Art Gallery. In the art world, this gallery has a fine reputation for its owner's interest in and knowledge of American Folk Art.

The book is divided into four main parts: the Story of the Decoy, The World of Carvings, the Useful and the Beautiful, and a fascinating chapter on the Men who Carved. I want to recommend this book to all EBBA readers on three counts. First, the chapter on the world of carvings will give potential decoy users many ideas with respect to shape and silhouette. It may even stimulate latter day carvers to abandon their band saws for an evening or two, so that the occasional hand carved and whittled bird may emerge. On the second count, the book will remind banders that they are the inheritors of a long tradition of bird hunting and handling, that, while they do not endorse catching birds for slaughter, they nonetheless share with the American Indian, who invented the decoy, a love of the wild, a fascination with the migrations of shore birds and water fowl, and a love of the chase--outwitting the flying and the feeding bird. Though the decoy's original purpose was to lure the duck or shore bird within gun range, the men who carved and used decoys were clearly men with an extraordinary feeling for their subjects. Let us also remember that Audubon followed his subjects with pencil and gun. This leads me to the third reason for recommending this book. The illustrations, 192 black and white photographs, eight pages in color, and forty very good line drawings, are a delight to look at, for though the majority of them are pictures of decoys, one can feel from the pictures the atmosphere of the marsh and of the shoreline. I suspect that many readers will have to put the book down after a few pages, put on a coat, and spend the day out of doors, so evocative will he find such pictures as "Yellowlegs on shore," and "Hudsonian Curlew in Surf."

I strongly recommend "The Art of the Decoy" to any bander who feels any aesthetic sense within him, as well as to those interested in trapping technique.

That decoy hunting should be taken as seriously as bird hunting is testified to by another book, "American Bird Decoys," by William J. Mackey, Jr., published by E. P. Dutton also priced at \$10. Mr. Mackey clearly knows his ducks, geese and shorebirds in both the ornithological and collector's sense. He has written a book that could only come from the hand of a man who has spent many years--forty in fact--with his subject. He has organized his book around the regional styles that one finds in decoys, and he has produced the Peterson of his subject. He has combed New England, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, the Delaware and Chesapeake Bay, and the Middle West, talking about decoys and their carvers. The wealth of information that Mr. Mackey gleaned is presented in a most readable way, but the book is a thoroughly professional work, indeed I would judge from my own knowledge that it will be the definitive work on the subject. The work of every important

carver is mentioned, and I think that the work of Elmer Crowell of East Harwich, the Cobbs of Cobb Island, Virginia, and Ira Hudson of Chincoteague has never been better described, to mention but four outstanding artists. Should you doubt that the term artist is appropriate, hasten to your local bookseller and steal a look at the picture of Crowell's Ruddy Turnstone and Golden Plover (page 54) and Shang Wheeler's Black Duck (page 67).

The book includes a fascinating chapter on the factory decoy, decoys produced on a fairly large scale in the 1880's. Wedd of Rochester sold his decoys for \$4 a dozen, with lathe turned bodies and hand carved heads. Mass production had come to the business, and now you could buy shore birds in two grades, one with enamel glass eyes, one with tack eyes!

The book contains advice for the beginning collector, which may be summarized 'caveat emptor.' The author has developed a decoy evaluation chart which with a little development should enable a collector to utilize a computer (small) to decide whether he has a good buy or not.

Both books have given me a great deal of pleasure, so I hesitate to recommend one over the other. Mrs. Earnest does not have the wealth of knowledge possessed by Mr. Mackey, but she brings to her subject the enthusiasm of someone who has just stumbled on a treasure that she wants to share. Her ornithological knowledge is a bit thin. Mr. Mackey knows his ducks and his decoys. I would go out after the brace if I were you.
Michael Thomas

THE BIRD WATCHER'S AMERICA

Edited by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., Director of the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University.
Illustrated by John Henry Dick
McGraw-Hill Book Company 1965 441 pages \$7.50

This is a wonderful book for browsing, for checking up on sections of the country with which one is familiar, or by all means, for taking along on a leisurely automobile trip through the United States and Canada.

In the Introduction, the editor quotes from a letter of explanation to the authors who were chosen for their enthusiasm for special areas: "The book is aimed at the audience of bird-watchers who, knowing the commoner species in at least their home region, are ready for encouragement in seeking other places for different birds." "When possible, the author should point up opportunities for investigation, so as to provide a challenge."

There are 46 heretofore unpublished essays by 44 authors, the majority well known in ornithology, wildlife management, natural history or conservation. They are teachers, novelists, newspaper columnists, businessmen and housewives. All have in common an "Insatiable love of finding, studying, and enjoying birds in natural environments and the

great ability to write about it." The editor knows many of them personally as is shown in his biographical sketches at the beginning of the chapters.

The one or two pen and ink sketches illustrating each chapter are beautifully done by John Henry Dick. They certainly set the stage for the writings.

The index is especially good in that it is subdivided under each subject into the separate states of the United States and the provinces of Canada.

The essays cover the following environments:

- Atlantic Coast and Coastal Islands
- Eastern Mountains and Foothills
- Pacific Coast, Western Mountains and Foothills
- Alaskan Islands
- The North Country
- The Wetlands
- Prairies, Deserts, Desert Mountains and Canyons
- The Lower Rio Grande Valley
- Migration Spectacles
- Some Avian Specialists

Probably one's greatest enjoyment in the book comes from reading chapters describing places one knows best, such as Finches of the High Rockies, or Bonaventure Island, or Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. I laughed out loud when reading of John and Mary Schmid up at Churchill on Hudson Bay. They give such delightful illustrated lectures at Bird-Banding meetings! Places are described to which one has longed to go, such as At Block Island in the Fall. Many new places are pictured which create a great desire in the reader to visit: Point Pelee, Canada, in the western corner of Lake Erie, or The Lower Rio Grande Valley, or Big Bend National Park in Texas. There are other places described to which only the hale and hearty experts will doubtless travel: The Aleutians, The Pribiloffs, Arctic Alaska, and The Great Dismal Swamp.

Although most chapters picture for us the various birds of a certain location, others pin-point a single species, as The Trumpeters of Red Rock Lakes. In Kirtland's Warbler Country, Golden-cheeks of the Edwards Plateau and The Cranes at Last Mountain Lake.

The description of migration of skeins of birds against the sky is vivid in Geese Along the Missouri.

Throughout the book, the feeling for conservation is very strong. The authors themselves often tell how their interest in bird-watching was aroused, or why they feel that these now-open and free lands must be kept for all time for the coming generations to enjoy.

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