

A Review and Commentary

By Gordon Gunter
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on

The Bird Life of Texas by Harry C. Oberholser. Paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Edited, with distribution maps and additional material, by Edward B. Kincaid, Jr. With the assistance of Suzanne Winckler and John Rowlett. Vol. 1, xxviii + 530 pp. Vol. 2, vii + 531-1039 pp. University of Texas Press. Austin and London. 1974. Boxed \$60.00

The writer approaches this subject as a general zoologist and not a well-honed ornithologist by inclination or training. As my friend Joel W. Hedgpeth says, "There are too many small brown birds". But I have seen the big hawks try to knock the eagles out of the sky and have seen 250,000 geese mount the air at one time, and a few other things that keep me hanging around the periphery of ornithology.

Also I have watched a good many bird watchers in my time. So when we are gathered around the sequestered campfires in Valhalla I expect to wander around the edge of the ornithological circle to see if the late James Fisher lost the pique which showed at Port Aransas when I told him how to tell the difference between Royal and Caspian terns flying by at a great distance, or to see if that gentle teacher Roger Tory Peterson has something new in valkyrie identification in flight or if Ludlow Griscom knows them all precisely by only flirts of their adornment. And there would be dear Connie Hagar with whom I would surely plot a little treason on how to get back to Texas.

Additionally, I knew Oberholser back in the early thirties when he was working on his "Birds of Louisiana". He was the thin ascetic type and I do not remember ever seeing him smile. But I remember him kindly, although I cannot recollect a single thing we ever said.

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Lastly, I believe strongly in publication of scientific data for it is the primary way we get ahead. Walter P. Taylor taught me years ago to abhor "those blizzards and blizzards of data" that come to naught. For that reason I suffered for years, along with many others, over the "Oberholser book". I remember discussing it with Howard Dodgen, then Executive Secretary of the Texas Game and Fish Commission. However, that Commission wisely chose instead to publish Peterson's handbook on Texas birds, which is much better suited to its clientele. Then I discussed it with the late John H. Baker of the National Audubon Society. But he said somewhat in expostulation, "Do you know how long it is"? Then he went on to say, "The Old Man wants it just so". And so at long last, some of us are grateful, thankful and deeply rejoicing that the Oberholser book on Texas birds has come out at last, even though it is several years after the death of its author who lived a very long life even so.

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So what do we have? It takes a little explaining. This book began when Vernon Bailey, the mammalogist, Oberholser and Fuertes, the artist, were sent by the Biological Survey to Texas to study the bird and mammal fauna of that region. They began in the Big Bend in 1901. Bailey's work came out in 1905, but for various reasons Oberholser's account of the birds was delayed and, as is stated in the preface, this delay was prophetic.

The manuscript grew to three million words and it touched upon everything that related to Texas birds, to which about two-thirds of all North American species north of Mexico belong. Nevertheless, no one can say the published version is verbose. Oberholser refused to publish anything separately and said it all belonged in the work on Texas birds. He retired in 1941, but kept doggedly on. Finally, through a series of fortunate happenings and events, The University of Texas Press became interested in the project and found a donor who helped finance it. Thus, my alma mater and the Press, with which I used to work on other matters, finally brought this astounding work to completion. In all that I take a vicarious pride.

The original manuscript was only a little short of 12,000 type-script pages. The 3,000,000 words had to be shortened to 1,000,000 and finally Doctor Oberholser reluctantly agreed because he saw no other way that publication would come. Even so, those who love completeness will be gratified to know that full microfilm copies of the manuscript are on file at the Smithsonian and in the Archives of The University of Texas. These along with the book will certainly be consulted by the careful hard-core professional for some few hundred years to come.

The editor and his assistants did a magnificent job, the grinding labor of which no one but they will ever fully comprehend. The editor got out and worked through the out-of-the-way counties that were less traveled in the first half of the century. The nearly 1,000 page introduction was cut to two chapters, History of Texas Ornithology and Ecology of Texas Birds. The ecology chapter, even with strong influence of the editor is not really modern and the reader must hold in mind the zeitgeist of the time when Oberholser made his observations and formulated his ideas. It discusses climate, physiography, vegetation, regional bird life and changes in bird life. The latter is most authoritative for Oberholser was there. As a factual reporter he does not let his feelings shine through often but under his account of the Mallard he speaks of "this terrible twentieth century" and discusses some of the factors that allow some ducks to come through to the twenty-first century. He also quotes with approval Delacour's expression "man-infested world", and wishes that the Golden Eagles really ate as many young of the destructive sheep and goats as their owners claim.

The species account gives the English name, usually the A.O.U. name, then comes the technical name, usually not the A.O.U. name. Doctor Oberholser was a distinguished taxonomist and he had his reasons, which are explained in an appendix. These are matters of deep and specialized scholarship, including Latin and Greek grammar, the Code and the voluminous literature of ornithology. Some of these discussions may even convince the American Ornithological Union. This is a factual account about birds and things that

add nothing are left out. Even in grammatical endings of species names the Doctor sometimes does not conform. Personally, I admire his stance for I know too well the sheep-syndrome of the average zoologist in name following, as well as the ignorant arrogance with which some people wend their way with errors through the International Code, as well as the blatant dishonesty of a few.

Then follows the detailed account. Oberholser examined thousands of birds and gives measurements and plumage descriptions. His place records were enormous and a great deal of the shortening of this book was by substitution of county maps for all species recorded ten times or more.

The species accounts are not long even so, and food habits are not emphasized for some species. Little else is left out and the color descriptions are generally greatly superior to old museum specimens. Oberholser seems to have examined nearly all preserved Texas specimens in all American collections, and he saw hundreds fresh. The selected bibliography is a real bibliography in the old sense of the word, for very few papers are actually cited in the text. But it is quite complete as I realized when I saw five of my contributions to ornithology cited and all of my contributions are minor.

Five hundred and forty-five species are thus described by one of the most careful and dedicated ornithologists the world has ever known. These descriptions fit many birds found widely distributed over the world. All real bird scholars will have to consult this book and it should be in all major libraries. It will be difficult to use for the average birder in the field for the two volumes weigh ten pounds. All ornithological clubs should have it, even those on the Atlantic Coast, for most of their birds are there.

The University of Texas Press spared nothing in the bookmaking art that I can see, and these volumes will last several hundred years. The photographs are expertly done and most of the Fuertes drawings have never been published before. Seventeen of these are in color.

Dr. Harry C. Oberholser was no hail-fellow-well-met. He meant business and his business was birds. His other various works placed him among the great American ornithologists. The Bird Life of Texas places him among the great ornithologists of the world.

Successful Eagle Nesting on Mississippi Coast

By W. H. Turcotte

As reported in the MOS Newsletter, Vol. 19, No. 4, page 11, in January 1974 a pair of Bald Eagles was observed nest-building in a tall pine tree in Harrison County on the Big Biloxi River. The nesting attempt was observed by Mr. Oliver C. Huch, a State Highway Department Engineer and by others throughout the cycle until the birds abandoned the completed nest about mid-April. No evidence of eggs or young could be observed during this time.

The 1974 nest was situated in a living slash pine tree well out into a marsh area bordering the east bank of the Big Biloxi River. It was reoccupied and on February 21, 1975 Mr. Huch and Mr. Flynn Clark observed one large young eagle in the nest with both adults sitting side by side on a limb. The immature was capable of climbing or leaping to the side of the nest.

On February 26, 1975 at about 1:00 P.M. I had the opportunity to observe the adults, nest and young in the nest. A 15-60 power zoomscope was used from the new Interstate 10 right-of-way. One adult eagle was seen on the side of the nest that appeared to be regurgitating or feeding on something or feeding young in the nest. No evidence of a young bird could be seen in the nest. The second adult, which had been perched on a dead tree in the marsh, flew to the edge of the nest beside the other adult. Soon afterward the bird seen feeding flew. A wing of a bird in the nest was then seen to move upward, then the head and neck of a young eagle was seen. The immature nestling then jumped and flew to the edge of the nest and across the nest beside the remaining adult. The nest-