

Book Review: Milton B. Trautman (with Mary Trautman). *Birds of Western Lake Erie: Documented Observations and Notes 1850-1980*. Edited by Ronald L. Stuckey.

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The renown of Milton B. Trautman (1899-1991) in the field of biology derives as much from his work as an ichthyologist as an ornithologist. His *The Fishes of Ohio* remains an indispensable source on the subject today. Among birders, particularly Ohio birders, Trautman is better known for *The Birds of Buckeye Lake*, a detailed study of the birds and natural history of the Buckeye Lake Region. *The Birds of Buckeye Lake* is a remarkable work, as interesting, fresh, and entertaining today as when first published.

Trautman was, by all accounts, a unique and interesting man. In many senses of the word, he was a true character. A man of modest build, and rather short in stature, the stamina and intensity he displayed while in the midst of field work was legendary among his peers, and he continued as an active field worker even in his later years. Perhaps somewhat surprising, then, is the fact that he suffered from chronic illnesses of one sort or another for most of the first thirty years of his life. Under his father's tutelage, Trautman became a master plumber, but with improving health in his early thirties, he turned all his attention to biology, a field that had captivated him since his boyhood (Mayfield 1992).

A widely respected authority on fish and birds, Trautman held jobs as a biologist with the Ohio Department of Conservation, the University of Michigan, and Ohio State University, though he never received a university-level academic degree. Fieldwork took him all over the North American continent, as well as to the Yucatan. All the while, he kept scrupulous records of practically everything he saw and encountered. His attention to details both interesting and mundane led to an impressive accumulation of facts and observations, much of which he turned into material for his publications. Some sense of Trautman's obsession with chronicling all that he experienced can be had by considering that he left behind an estimated 30,000 pages of journal entries, and still had time to note "how many strokes of his bicycle pedals it required go to work under different wind conditions" (Mayfield 1992).

To study nocturnal migration, he slept under the stars on the Lake Erie shore; to learn how to separate gulls by their calls, he spent hour after hour in an ice shanty near South Bass Island, fishing and studying, listening and learning. To find out what ducks were eating during migration stops, he shot them and dutifully identified and counted everything in their stomachs and crops. This exacting field work and analysis is clearly evident in *The Birds of Buckeye Lake* and *The Fishes of Ohio*.

Birds of Western Lake Erie doesn't compare easily to Trautman's earlier books, largely because it is an unfinished work. Trautman's ally and confidante, as well as his equal partner in countless hours of field work, was his wife, Mary

Auten Trautman, herself a biologist, with a Ph.D. in entomology (Mayfield 1992). From the time Trautman began working on *Birds of Western Lake Erie* around 1981, until her death in 1986, Mary Auten Trautman helped to organize, transcribe, and compose the species accounts that make up the present work. Sadly, after Mary's death, Trautman lost the interest or the will needed to finish the project. He died in 1991.

Recognizing the importance of even an unfinished work by Milton Trautman, Ronald L. Stuckey, a friend and student of Trautman's, edited the manuscript and worked to get it published.

What we have is essentially half a study of the bird life of the western basin of Lake Erie. Everything from loons through woodpeckers is covered in its entirety. Passerine coverage begins strong with complete treatment of the flycatchers, but then fades: coverage of the swallows is incomplete, all the wren species are accounted for, but the only thrush—and the last species covered in the book—is Townsend's solitaire.

The strength of the book lies in the detailed treatment of the bird groups that were Trautman's favorites in the first place: the "water" birds—loons, grebes, swans, ducks, herons, shorebirds, rails, and gulls—and raptors. In contrast to the experience of most birders and ornithologists today, Trautman could claim to have actually eaten or at some point at least collected almost every species in those groups. Some of his accounts of the finer points separating the succulent from the unsavory among waterfowl and waterbirds led me to wonder if there isn't somewhere in the Trautman archives at Ohio State University the makings of a wild game cookbook: "Wild Fare From the Water and Air," by Milton B. Trautman, or something along those lines.

As is the case with other books treating the bird life of a specific area in taxonomic order, *Birds of Western Lake Erie* is enjoyable to browse through: to move from the short-billed dowitcher account, where we find that market hunters in the late 19th century found the species easy to hunt because of its "unsuspecting" nature (dowitchers were easy to lure in with calls and decoys, and highly desired as game birds), to the red-breasted merganser account in which Trautman reports the only known record of breeding by this species in Ohio. The latter is an interesting story. In May 1956, while studying black ducks on South Bass Island, Trautman "was amazed to see a female Red-breasted Merganser, followed by two small ducklings, leave Starve Island and swim to South Bass. They arrived at the south shore within 150 feet of me, then disappeared in the comparatively short vegetation. Dashing to the spot I hunted in vain for the female and her ducklings." Amazing, indeed!

Reading through the species accounts for grebes, one finds Trautman postulating that, based upon discussions with commercial fisherman in the region, and the tendency of the species to show up in numbers at inland sites in winter only during severe cold periods, that "a wintering population" of red-necked grebes "exists on Lake Erie or to the north of it." This hypothesis, as yet unproved, has come to be shared by a number of ornithologists and birders today.

An interesting theme that comes up repeatedly in the book is Trautman's concern over the loss of wetland habitat in northwestern Ohio, as well as changes

in management practices of protected wetlands. While some readers might not agree with Trautman's assertions as to the negative effects of management practices in protected wetlands in Lake Erie's western basin, all will agree that the loss of wetlands to development has had a singularly negative effect on animal and plant communities in the region. Trautman rightly criticizes this trend, which continues today.

In general, today, bird monographs are not written in a "personal" or first-person style. *Birds of Western Lake Erie*, on the other hand, is filled with Trautman's accounts of his own adventures afield and of the many, many hours he spent in museum collections, sorting through specimens. Reading this book, one gets a sense of Trautman's personality—including the kinds of things that bothered him or caused friction between him and other birders and researchers. It would be a stretch to say the book is as much about Trautman as it is about the birds of Western Lake Erie, but one can learn quite a bit about him and the way he approached his work in reading this book.

Through a combination of old-fashioned field work—floating in rivers and marshes, tramping through fields, mucking through wetlands—and research—combing through old records and specimens in museum collections or consulting retired market hunters, sportsmen of old, etc.—Trautman has created a picture of the birds of the western Lake Erie region both personal and scholarly. The result is of a style we don't see too often these days—a scholarly work nonetheless conversational and personal in tone. It's a book that would not be written the same way today.

Take Trautman's golden eagle account, for instance. It begins with the expected references to 19th century records in Ohio, then moves to a general seasonal distribution of the birds (scattered from late October, into winter, with the latest records in mid-May; usually immature birds) before moving into accounts of the sadly comical and the simply strange. In December 1926, Trautman writes

I interviewed a farmer in western Ohio about a mounted Golden Eagle. He told me . . . that he first saw "the grand-daddy of all chicken hawks" standing on the ridge of his tall barn. He got an old, rusty rifle and fired five times at the bird, but failed to hit it. After driving to town in his Model T Ford to buy a box of cartridges, he finally hit the eagle on his eighth shot. . . .

Trautman explains that he didn't really believe the farmer's story, which seems to support claims about the supposed unwariness of the species, until he had an experience at his home on South Bass Island with a sub-adult golden eagle he found perched above his chicken shed. Only after Trautman began running around, waving his arms and shouting, did the bird finally fly away.

Finally, Trautman recounts seeing a golden eagle attempt to take down a goose over South Bass Island. While watching a kettle of red-tailed hawks on 25 March 1943, Trautman saw a golden eagle fly into the kettle and scatter the

hawks. Then the eagle went after bigger prey: "the eagle twice stooped and with its talons struck the wing of a large, low-flying tri-motor plane as it flew over our house," writes Trautman. The "goose" in this instance was one of the "Tin Goose" Island Airlines Ford Tri-Motor airplanes that flew passengers to and from the Lake Erie islands for a number of decades.

Another instance of something one isn't likely to read in a contemporary monograph on birds is Trautman's story of his struggle to save the hawks of South Bass Island from slaughter by killing a northern goshawk. According to Trautman, South Bass Island residents used to shoot hawks lest the birds kill their chickens and livestock. After years of public relations efforts on behalf of hawks, by 1954 Trautman writes he and a friend had "convinced the islanders not to shoot hawks." But on 25 November 1954, the tenuous detente was nearly shattered when an island resident told Trautman that "a hawk as large as a red-tail with the large head and neck of an eagle" had been killing rabbits and pheasants in a cedar woods near his home for some time, but that the trouble had escalated, and the hawk had turned its attentions to the man's helpless chickens. "Realizing that something had to be done to avoid a reoccurrence of hawk shooting," Trautman and his wife searched the cedar woods for the voracious hawk. It didn't take long for the Trautmans to locate the scattered remains of a few rabbits and pheasants, but they didn't find the killer. The next day he returned to the site, "whistling 'screech-owl' to possibly attract the hawk when my cap was jerked from head and disappeared in the distances in the talons of a Goshawk." The goshawk was obviously unaware of the danger it had put itself in by crossing that particular Rubicon to steal Milton B. Trautman's hat. Late in the afternoon a few days after suffering this effrontery, he writes "I went into the center of the cedar woods, backed against the bole of a red cedar tree to protect myself from rear attack, and began to whistle 'screech owl.' . . . The second time I whistled the Goshawk instantly located the sound . . . and dove directly at me. I instinctively shot it." Phew! Thus were the hawks of South Bass Island saved from persecution as a result of Trautman's sunset standoff with a rapacious northern goshawk.

Intermixed among the species accounts are occasional stories of some of the people Trautman encountered or befriended—or didn't befriend, as was sometimes the case—in the field. Some readers will be able to read between the lines of the gull and tern passages and recognize birders with whom Trautman had obvious disagreements. It troubled him that birders in the 1970s and 1980s were making claims for species for which they didn't have voucher specimens. But one birder with whom Trautman had no quarrels was a man with whom every reader will be familiar.

On 31 May 1931 . . . at Bay Point in Ottawa County, a man rapidly approached and asked if I were Trautman. He then asked for the name of the birds that were singing "all over." After I told him they were Traill's Flycatchers, we watched several of the singing birds. He maintained that if they were Traill's, then the birds in the State of New York were not this species, although in size and plumage they appeared to be identical. After he left abruptly, I realized that he had not

mentioned his name. During the next 10 years we became friends, and we were frequent birding companions. He was Roger Tory Peterson.

It's possible that for every hour he spent in the field, Milton B. Trautman spent another hour in the collections of a research museum, poring over the specimens, many of which he had collected himself. For Trautman, work in the field informed work in the museum, and work in the museum, in turn, informed and improved his identification skills in the field. In the late 1930s, after studying northern goshawks in the field in Michigan, and then looking at a large series of museum specimens, he came to the conclusion that he had probably misidentified a number of immature Cooper's hawks in the 1920s by claiming they were immature northern goshawks.

He applied a similar logic built around a combination of field and museum work to the identification of difficult species groups such as western and semipalmated sandpipers, short- and long-billed dowitchers, *Empidonax* flycatchers, and the Thayer's/Iceland gull complex. Trautman's impatience with birders who weren't as experienced in specimen study as he is especially evident in the section of the book on flycatchers, where he complains that he knew birders who were confidently identifying birds as yellow-bellied flycatchers in the field, but who were unable to correctly identify in the hand specimens of yellow-bellied flycatchers, or any of the other empids for that matter.

I wonder what Trautman would think of the state of bird identification today, particularly as it pertains to gulls, shorebirds, and *Empidonax* flycatchers?

Birds of Western Lake Erie, though incomplete in a literal sense, does provide a fairly robust sense of what Milton B. Trautman thought and knew of the birds of the region. Its strengths are clearly those of Trautman himself: obsession with detail, love of the subject, and an impressive accumulation of knowledge about the birds and natural history of the western Lake Erie region. The book is illustrated with a number of clean line drawings, black-and-white photos, and detailed maps of the counties covered in the text. The index is easy to use and seems to be thorough and accurate: birds are listed under their common names. People and places mentioned in the text are also indexed.

Works Cited

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Gulls Of Lake Erie



Little gulls show varied intermediate characters in their second winter. Note the underwing shows a patchy version of the full adult's sooty look, and the black markings remaining on the tips of two primaries on the left wing. The black skullcap is pronounced on this bird. Photo by John Pogacnik 6 Feb at E. 72nd St.



This less than fully adult bird, while its underwing looks much sootier overall, shows obvious signs of immaturity in two primaries of the left upperwing. Its skullcap is noticeably paler, and the dark "scarf" on the neck is more pronounced than normal. Photo by John Pogacnik 22 Jan at E. 72nd St.



Three other gull species accompany this adult California gull, photographed by John Pogacnik on 30 Dec at E 72nd St in Cleveland.



There's something jarring about this photo—a laughing gull in immaculate breeding array standing on the ice at Lorain Harbor. John Pogacnik caught this image there 25 Feb



Photographed by Sean Zadar on New Year's Day in Cleveland, this young Iceland gull shows the "gentler" look of the species, with a dove-like head profile and more delicate bill; note also the darker markings on the tertials.