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OUTRAM BANGS, 1863-1932.\*

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(Plate IX.)

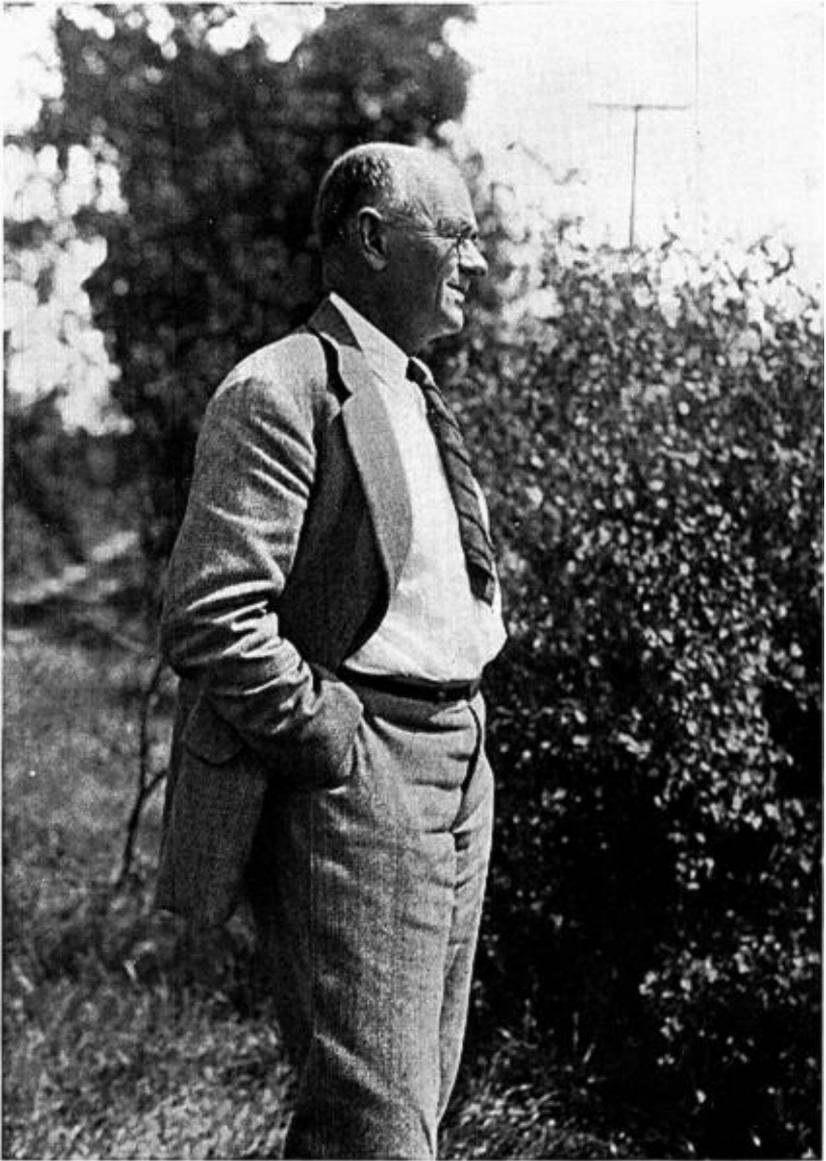
OUTRAM BANGS, a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, Curator of birds at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and one of the greatest ornithologists that this country has ever produced, died at his summer home at East Wareham, Massachusetts, on September 22, 1932, after an illness of two weeks.

He was born in Watertown, Massachusetts, January 12, 1863, second son of Edward and Annie Outram (Hodgkinson) Bangs. For a good many years after his birth Watertown was a small country town with many large farms and estates and surrounded by woods, open fields and market gardens. For one of young Outram's tendencies Watertown was ideally situated, as it was easily accessible from Boston and lay at the threshold of the beautiful New England countryside immediately to the westward. His parents also owned a house in Boston which they occupied during the winter months.

Bangs was one of those fortunate mortals, born with a love of nature and the outdoors that rule their entire lives. As boys, he and his brother Edward A., two years older, were inseparable companions in their rambles about Watertown and the surrounding country. They began the collection known in later years as the "Collection of E. A. and O. Bangs," long before their parents

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\* Read at the Fiftieth Stated Meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, Quebec, October 18, 1932.



*Sincerely yours  
Oulian Bangs.*

entrusted them with fire-arms, their specimens being taken with catapults or "sling shots," in the use of which the boys developed considerable dexterity. The catapult was supplemented by stick traps or horse hair nooses as occasion offered. In the course of their wanderings the Bangs boys found C. J. Maynard who helped them to improve their skins and sold them specimens. Like all boys of their age and day the Bangs brothers collected birds eggs, but went to great pains to secure more species than the average boy. Finding that Nighthawks were breeding on the flat, gravelled roofs of houses in the Back Bay district of Boston, the problem that presented itself was that of getting up onto the roof of a house where a Nighthawk might be breeding. The simple but effective stratagem was to start playing ball in the street, after a time manage to throw the ball up onto the roof and then ask to be allowed up to look for the ball.

When Outram was about 10 years old his family went to live in England for nearly a year. It was in 1874 at Oundle, in Northampton, that he had his first experience with fire-arms. In some way or other he and an English cousin saved up enough from their respective allowances to purchase an antiquated horse pistol. Armed with this weapon they started out to collect something, first loading the pistol with what seemed to be the requisite amount of powder and shot and then adding a little more for good measure. After the first shot the collecting expedition ended abruptly, for the horse pistol disintegrated, leaving the young shooter holding the remains of the butt. By some miracle neither of the boys was injured. Mr. Bangs, after learning of this incident gave Outram his first gun, feeling that he would be safer with a suitable piece, than with some other makeshift.

Returning to this country the Bangs brothers continued their collecting activities at every opportunity. For a time beginning in the fall of 1876 Outram kept a diary in which he recorded his activities. Much detail is devoted to the pursuit of birds, with occasionally some casual mention of school or lessons. The following entry was made on January 12, 1877, his fourteenth birthday: "This morning was my burthday and we did not go to school. While we were at breakfast we saw a snowy owl and went after him across the ice on the [Charles] rivver and Ned [E. A.

Bangs] went around to Cambridge. I got within about 10 Paces when he flew, I fired but had a miss fire. He lit again and I went after him and this time it went off but I did not get him. I got out of Cartridges so I came back. I had five presents . . . a case fore the sixteen bore gun . . . and a thousand printed labels for our birds."

Judging from the stories of his early experiences that Bangs liked to tell on occasions, one wonders that he or his brother did not meet some untimely end. The buggy in which they went on their more extended trips to Wayland and Sudbury was usually laden with an assortment of firearms, all of them loaded and most of them cocked. Once when in a hurry to return home they prodded their horse with the muzzle of an old fashioned English "rook-rifle," the trigger caught on the dasher and the rifle was discharged, the ball just penetrating the skin of the horse's rump. Bangs often told how their main concern was that their misdeed might be discovered and followed by a parental edict forbidding the use of horse and buggy in the future. They drove to a veterinarian whom they knew, swore him to secrecy and explained the situation. He extracted the bullet and dressed the wound. The incident was never discovered. On another occasion Outram and some other boys set out to visit the islands in Boston Harbor in a rowboat; one of the crowd managed to shoot a hole in the bottom of the boat and it required their united efforts to keep from swamping.

Bangs attended Noble's School in Boston where he prepared for Harvard College, which he entered in the fall of 1880. Attendance at college naturally curtailed his field activities to some extent, but he still collected locally, found time to go shooting in the autumn and of course his summers were free and generally spent at Wareham, Massachusetts, where his family owned a large property. While in college he took up wrestling and won the college light-weight championship. After completing his college course in 1884 he spent some months on a ranch in North Dakota where he enjoyed Prairie Chicken shooting, but did not add to his collections.

Returning to Boston he commenced his brief business experience, entering the office of the C. B. & Q. railroad. He remained there only a short time; office routine proved irksome and uncongenial and since it was not absolutely necessary for him to earn his living,

he wisely chose to follow his natural inclinations. The next few years were devoted to extended shooting trips in the fall and to fishing, and while thus engaged he collected a few specimens. Most of the accessions to the collection during these years were by exchange or purchase.

About 1890 he conceived the idea of systematically studying the mammals of eastern North America, inspired no doubt by the efforts of C. H. Merriam and the latter's colleagues in the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy of the Department of Agriculture. Either alone or with his brother Edward or with his friend Gerrit S. Miller, he trapped assiduously in New England and Nova Scotia, besides making a trip to Lake Edward, Quebec, in the fall of 1895. His three field trips of major importance, on the results of which his most noteworthy papers in the field of mammalogy were based, are as follows. From January 30 to March 9, 1895 was spent at Oak Lodge, opposite Micco, Brevard County, Florida. In 1896 he worked at St. Mary's, Georgia from March 9 to April 19, also making short visits to Cumberland Island, and to localities on the Florida side of the St. Mary's River. His third and last trip to the south was made in 1897 between February 4 and April 6 when he collected at the following localities in Florida: Point Matanzas, Carterville, Anastasia Island, Oak Lodge, Eau Gallie and Gainesville. In addition to the mammals which he collected personally he had collectors working for him in Labrador, Newfoundland, Georgia, Florida, the Florida Keys and the coast of Louisiana.

One of the incidents of his local mammal trapping that he sometimes referred to was how he and Gerrit Miller saved the Muskeget Island Beach Mouse (*Microtus breweri*) from extinction. One summer while trapping on Muskeget they found the island overrun with house cats gone wild, but not a sign of *Microtus*. On a smaller island separated by only a narrow channel the mice occurred in abundance. He and Miller procured some catnip and either trapped or shot every cat on the main island; they then waded over to the smaller island and caught a large number of mice with which they restocked Muskeget. The following winter the smaller island was washed away in a storm.

While up to 1894 he had never published a paper of any kind,

between 1894 and 1899 he has over 70 titles to his credit, 55 of them on mammalian subjects, usually papers of considerable length and involving the study of large amounts of material. The fifteen papers on birds published during this same period were chiefly short notes on birds of eastern North America. Just what caused Bangs to turn from mammals back to his first love, birds, he never exactly knew himself. It was probably a combination of circumstances; perhaps he felt that the eastern North American field for mammals was pretty well exhausted, while the West was being worked by Merriam and others; perhaps he felt that the ornithology of Central and South America offered a wider field. Whatever may have been the cause his change of interests took place between 1898 and 1900. Suffice it to say that from the time that W. W. Brown began to send him birds from the Santa Marta region of Colombia in 1897, Bangs gradually dropped out of systematic mammalogy and became more and more engrossed in ornithology.

His connection with the Museum of Comparative Zoology dates from 1899. In that year his collection of mammals, numbering 10,000 skins and skulls and including over 100 types, was purchased by subscription and presented to Harvard College; at the same time Bangs was appointed Assistant in Mammalogy. His collection of birds remained at his home in Boston and was now growing rapidly. During the time he spent at Cambridge in caring for the collection of mammals he found time to assist William Brewster in arranging and identifying a good many birds that had laid unidentified for a long time. His first paper in the Museum Bulletin was published in 1901 and dealt with a collection of birds then recently acquired from the Riu Kiu Islands.

During the first few years of the present century when both Bangs and his life long friend John E. Thayer were actively building up their private collections, they coöperated in sending out collectors. Bangs was primarily interested in Central America, Thayer in North America. Collectors in the employ of one or the other worked in Lower California, Mexico, British Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama and the West Indies; the resulting collections were often worked up jointly.

During the course of his studies of Central American birds

Bangs often had occasion to take material to the National Museum for comparison, and these visits resulted in friendships with such ornithologists as Ridgway, Richmond and Nelson.

In 1908 Bangs' splendid private collection of birds numbering 24,000 skins, all beautifully prepared, adequately labelled and fully identified, was presented to the Museum. From that time on he assumed actual charge of the arrangement and building up of the Museum's bird collection. Nominally he was in charge of the mammals and Brewster of birds, but the latter was only too glad to have another share with him the work and responsibility. Bangs' success in bringing the collection from its small and insignificant position to one of the finest in the world is well known, but the time and effort and ceaseless attention that he lavished upon it can never be fully appreciated. For many years he worked practically single-handed, but during all this time collections that came in were promptly reported on, the birds catalogued, put away in neat rows in which not a skin was out of line, cases carefully labelled and trays marked with the name of the species they contained. No specimen was ever misplaced, every skin instantly accessible. He found time to arrange a first series of many of the larger and more important families. The neatness and orderliness of the arrangement of the collection was his pride and joy; clumsiness on the part of others which resulted in the jumbling of specimens in a tray was positively painful to him. I have seen him spend hours rearranging trays that some careless visitor had disarranged, but never by word or manner did he ever intimate to the culprit that such carelessness was only adding to his heavy duties. Kindness was Bangs' most outstanding characteristic, he hated to hurt anyone's feelings or to disappoint anyone. He often exchanged a rare bird from a very small series because he disliked to say "no" under any circumstances. No matter how busy he might be he gave every visitor to the bird room all the assistance that lay within his power.

In addition to the characteristics which made him an unexcelled curator, he possessed to a remarkable degree a faculty that every successful systematist must have, namely the "specific sense." While such a sense must be an inherent part of the systematist's make-up, it can be sharpened by constant experience and in

Bangs' case became very acute. His memory too was remarkably developed along certain lines; he had no memory at all for names, either of men or birds, rather it was photographic; he could instantly again identify any bird that he had ever seen or handled, if at a loss to recall the name he could go at once to its place in the collection or pick out a reference to it in literature, or bring up some interesting historical fact concerning it, some peculiarity in its systematic position. In short, he could identify a bird in many other ways besides giving a name to it. In many cases he could identify at first glance a bird that he had never seen before; this was done apparently by a rapid mental process of elimination, after placing the bird in its family. He also had an uncanny ability correctly to place a bird in its proper systematic position by merely looking at it, its gross external characters and "general effect" being all that was necessary. Birds whose classification he questioned years ago have more recently been removed to the position he advocated as a result of anatomical studies by others.

Although his knowledge of birds from all parts of the world was profound, for many years the birds of China interested him more than those from any other region. He therefore devoted much time and effort to building up this side of the collection, with the result that the Museum now has what is probably the finest and most complete series of Chinese birds anywhere, while Bangs himself was recognized as a leading authority on Chinese birds.

Bangs was a prolific but not a voluminous writer; the number of titles in his bibliography amounts to about 275 and covers not only his earlier work on mammals but a great variety of ornithological subjects; descriptions of new genera and species, faunal papers, taxonomic and nomenclatorial discussions. His writings are characterized by an individuality and forcefulness of style entirely his own in which the conventional is disregarded when his ideas did not agree with generally accepted theories.

One reason for Bangs' success as an ornithologist was his open-mindedness and readiness to modify his own views. He was the first of the American ornithologists to break away from the American conception that actual intergradation is a necessary criterion of the subspecies; he was also one of the first to register his disapproval of the excessive multiplication of monotypic genera based on slight

differences of external structure. In describing new forms he went to a great deal of trouble to pick out appropriate or distinctive names; adhering to the idea that a short classical word made the best one, such common names as *minor*, and *saturatus* he refrained from using however apt they might be, patronymics he seldom used and was never guilty of burdening nomenclature with geographic names.

Outside of his beloved collection of birds he had three other interests, hunting, fishing and horticulture. Mention has already been made of his fondness for shooting, but by this is to be understood only upland shooting over dogs. Up to the time of the first attack of the circulatory trouble, four years before the one that led to his death, he was afield in the covers on every favorable day during the open season. Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock were his favorite game birds, but he also enjoyed snipe shooting when there were plenty of these birds about. Duck or shore bird shooting did not interest him at all. As a fisherman he was devoted to trout, chiefly because pursuit of them lead him out into the beautiful New England streams in the spring and early summer. At his home in Cambridge he had a conservatory built against one side of his house and here he raised and cared for those varieties of plants and shrubs of which he was particularly fond; during the summer he always had a small flower garden both in Cambridge and at his summer home in Wareham. Long experience and a natural taste made him a successful propagator by all the methods in vogue among horticulturists.

Bangs' one and only field trip outside of North America was made to Jamaica in 1906 and was cut short by an attack of dengue fever; he was on the island only a little over a month, collecting about 100 birds in that time. When we consider his love of the outdoors, that he liked to collect and could make a good bird skin with a reasonable degree of speed, it seems strange that he did not take the field frequently. The fact remains however that he did not and it is just as well so, since the Museum could ill spare his curatorial services and an ornithologist of his calibre can often perform more valuable service by remaining at his desk.

During the summer of 1925 he made a trip to Europe for the purpose of visiting the principal museums, meeting ornithologists,

and arranging for exchanges. The most important result of his journey was the visit to his friend J. D. LaTouche in County Wicklow, Ireland, where arrangements were made for the purchase of LaTouche's splendid collection of Chinese birds.

His membership in the A. O. U. dates from 1884, when he was elected an associate member. He was chosen a Fellow in 1901. That Bangs never held office in the A. O. U. was entirely of his own choosing. Naturally averse to presiding or to speaking in public, he discouraged any efforts on the part of his friends to propose his name for any position.

In 1918 his Alma Mater recognized his devoted services to the Museum as well as his scientific attainments by awarding him an honorary degree of A.M. with the following characterization, "A naturalist from childhood with zeal unchanged through life."

Always an active and vigorous man accustomed to wading the icy streams in spring and tramping the woods and meadows in the fall, his first illness, four years before his final one, brought a sudden curtailment of his outdoor activities. His doctor forbade hunting, fishing or even the care of his conservatory. It was then that Bangs' calm and philosophical disposition kept him happy and contented with life as he was thereafter forced to live it. He said that he did not mind giving up shooting since hunting in New England was too much of an effort for the return; the same philosophy applied to fishing, and he claimed that it really was a relief not to have the care of his plants on his mind any longer. Going about in the evening and attendance at meetings was likewise discouraged by his doctor's edict, but to one of his retiring disposition this order was not in the least a hardship.

In addition to his membership in the Union he was a Foreign Member of the British Ornithologists' Union, a Corresponding Member of the Deutsche Ornithologische Gesellschaft, a member of the Washington Academy of Sciences, New England Zoological Club, Boston Society of Natural History, Biological Society of Washington, Cooper Ornithological Club, and a charter member of the American Society of Mammalogists.

There remains only to mention his connection with the Nuttall Club. He was elected to membership in March 1880 and at the time of his death there were only three living members whose span

of membership exceeded his. He served as a member of the council from 1897 until ill health forced him to resign that office in 1929. On March 17, 1930, the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his election to membership, he was with difficulty prevailed upon to attend, but the fact that his friend Thomas E. Penard was to read a paper on the life of Lafresnaye was an argument that he could not resist. Bangs was greatly surprised at the significance of the meeting and more so when copies of his paper "Types of Birds now in the Museum of Comparative Zoology" were distributed to those present. His list of types had been submitted for publication as a Museum bulletin some time previously, but he had no inkling that it had even gone to press, or that it was to appear as it did as an anniversary publication. As a further token of the esteem in which he was held by his fellow members he was presented with a handsomely engrossed salutation which reads:—

"The Nuttall Ornithological Club salutes Outram Bangs, its most distinguished member. Elected fifty years ago you have accomplished greatly. Vigorous beyond us all, you stand today a naturalist and a sportsman beloved by all your peers. You have inspired young men, encouraged explorers, aided your fellows. From a pitiful nucleus you have built a collection of birds uniquely and very completely serviceable. Above all you have been our warm and unswerving friend. We know no higher praise and we wish you many happy days to come.'

'Winter may come; he brings but nigher  
His circle (yearly narrowing) to the fire  
Where old friends meet.'

'The wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of  
leisure.' "

*Museum of Comparative Zoology,  
Cambridge, Mass.*