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IN MEMORIAM: NATHAN CLIFFORD BROWN
1856-1941

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Plate 14

NATHAN CLIFFORD BROWN, a Founder (1883), Fellow (1883-1935), and Fellow Emeritus (1936-1941) of The American Ornithologists' Union, was born in Portland, Maine, October 13, 1856, and died in Atlantic City, New Jersey, March 20, 1941. He was descended from two of Maine's most prominent families. His father, Philip Henry Brown, was the son of Hon. John Bundy Brown, who came to Portland from Lancaster, New Hampshire, as a young man and entered upon a most prosperous business career. His mother, Fannie Clifford Brown, was the daughter of Nathan Clifford, jurist, statesman and Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Nathan Clifford Brown was of frail physique and his occupations through life were subject to interruptions by frequent periods of illness. His early home on Vaughan Street in Portland was on the southwestern part of Bramhall's Hill, an eminence rising to the height of 175 feet above sea level, on an arm of Portland Harbor known as Fore River. Well-kept orchards were on the estate of his father and the adjoining one of his paternal grandfather; on the slope to the southwest was a cemetery of about 15 acres, while to the southeast were characteristic Maine pastures, sloping nearly to the shore of Fore River. Many birds found homes in these orchards and pastures in summer and hosts of migrants paused to rest and feed on the southward-sloping hillside.

This section was Transition in its biotic affinities. At an early age Clifford Brown began to observe closely the numerous birds met in his walks about home, to note their habits and songs and hunt for their nests, which he refrained from disturbing beyond taking a single egg of each species for his collection. His active interest in



Nathan Clifford Brown.

egg collecting passed away with his boyhood. He also spent much time at his father's summer home at "Glen Cove" on the eastern shore of Cape Elizabeth which faced the main ship channel leading into Portland Harbor. Here the moisture-bearing winds from the sea favored evergreen woodlands and here a touch of the Canadian fauna was found; Golden-crowned Kinglets, Myrtle Warblers, Juncos and White-throated Sparrows were frequently found breeding there. In spring the migrating birds favoring these conditions followed the patches of spruce woods of the swamps and shores of Cape Elizabeth to that point, to take their departure to the spruce-clad islands of Casco Bay, trending away to the northeastward. Though the ecologic distinctions indicated in his two places of observation were unheralded at that time, he learned to know these avian preferences and to look for his birds in their natural haunts, a store of knowledge of much use to him later in his career. As a youth he ranged rather widely through Cumberland County, of which Portland is the shire town, and the adjoining County of York, on excursions of short duration. At the age of fifteen, in July, 1871, with his younger brother, Philip, and "Ned Blake" he performed a more ambitious journey from Portland to Lake Umbagog in the northern part of Oxford County, a distance of about 96 miles, when the region was little disturbed by the works of man.

On this expedition he first saw the Canada Jay and noted the Whip-poor-will and Bronzed Grackle, two birds not then common in the Portland region. After his return from Umbagog, in the month of August, he did his first shooting of game. An event of the same year, which indicates approval and encouragement for his study of birds was the gift from his parents of the new (1870) edition of "The Birds of New England and Adjacent States" by E. A. Samuels, then the popular manual of northeastern birds. Another step in his ornithological beginnings was his first attempt at taxidermy, when he skinned a chickadee.

In 1873 he entered Bowdoin College (from which he received the degree of A.B. "Causa Honoris" in 1883), but periods of illness interrupted his studies. The following year (1874) he made several rather long journeys when, regardless of their purposes, he seized every opportunity to make observations and notes on some of the birds which he saw. He entered his father's office but it soon became evident that he was physically unable to endure the confinement exacted by this employment. He now, apparently, became confirmed in his determination to make ornithology a pursuit and early in

December (1874), went to Newtonville, Massachusetts, to study the technique of preparing bird skins with the veteran collector, Charles J. Maynard.

In this art he became an accomplished master. From Newtonville he returned to Portland late in January, 1875, and began collecting and preserving specimens in early February. The season appears to have been one when large numbers of Pine Grosbeaks, Red Crossbills, Redpolls and Snow Buntings wintered about Portland, affording abundant material for his work.

In the fall he returned to Bowdoin College, and it was probably that season when, with Robert E. Peary, later Rear Admiral Peary, he engaged a room in Brunswick in which they prepared their specimens.

During the years of 1875, 1876 and 1877 he worked in Maine with occasional short visits into eastern New Hampshire. Though his most continuous and intensive work was in Portland and the adjoining towns in Cumberland County, named in his "Catalogue of Birds of Portland and Vicinity," his operations frequently took him to the adjoining counties of York on the southwest and Oxford on the northeast. An incident of that period, which illustrates the change of sentiment now prevailing in the matter of shooting birds compared with that of half a century ago, was once related by Mr. Brown to the writer. On one of his collecting trips in the town of Deering (annexed to Portland in 1899), he discovered a flock of Red Crossbills feeding in a dooryard. Approaching the house he rang the bell which was answered by a young lady, of whom he asked permission to shoot some of the birds. She smilingly replied, "No objection at all; shoot away." His register shows three specimens of "*Loxia americana*, Deering, Maine, November 30, 1876," which undoubtedly is the date of the incident.

Closing the season of 1877 in November, he turned his face to new fields. The following January (1878), he was at Coosada, Elmore County, Alabama. There he lived with a planter from January 21 to April 30. Returning to Portland in May he continued collecting near home until late in December. During this period he completed the report of his work in Alabama, which was published in two instalments, October, 1878, and January, 1879 (Bull. Nuttall Orn. Club, 3: 168-174; 4: 7-13). Howell says of this report that it was "the first modern list of the birds of Alabama" (1924, Bds. Alabama, p. 11). Among the more noteworthy results of the expedition was the discovery of three and the capture of two specimens of Swainson's Warbler at a time when its habits were very little known, and its

occurrence known only from the island of Cuba and the states of Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, with an unsupported report from Illinois; hence, its discovery in Alabama was an important extension of its established range.

William Brewster, in his illuminating history of the bird, says: "The year 1878 brought an important contribution to our knowledge of the mysterious bird from the pen of Mr. N[athan] C[lifford] Brown, . . . who, after Bachman, seems to have been the first observer to learn anything respecting its habits" (1885, Auk, II: 65). Brown was also the first collector to discover the occurrence of Leconte's Sparrow east of the Mississippi River, and show that it was a rare winter bird in central Alabama.

Late in December, 1879, he began his first season at Boerne, Kendall County, southwestern Texas, where he continued to work until April 3, 1880. There in an arid region, where no fertile plantation invited him, he lodged in the Boerne Hotel, using saddle horses to reach his collecting grounds. Among the results of this season was the discovery of the Rock Sparrow (*Peucaea ruficeps eremoeca*, now generically *Aimophila*), which he described in January, 1882, and an addition to the little knowledge then existing concerning the range and habits of the Golden-cheeked Warbler. Returning to Portland in April, 1880, he resumed collecting in the region and continued until the middle of October.

The year of 1881 was occupied with local collecting, work on the bird collection of the Portland Society of Natural History, where he had been appointed Curator of Ornithology, and the elucidation of various problems of taxonomy in his Texas collection, which had been made at a meeting ground of forms from several different faunal areas. His report was finally published in January, 1882 (Bull. Nuttall Orn. Club, 7: 33-42).

These tasks finished, he resumed collecting in the region of Portland and continued until the end of the year. In December of this year (1882), he published in the Proceedings of the Portland Society of Natural History his 'Catalogue of the Birds of Portland, Maine, and Vicinity.' This was a digest of the records resulting from his twelve years of observation and collecting in the region. Based upon that firm foundation, it stands as a source of reference for the comparison of the bird life of the region at that time with that of the present day.

The following month he returned to Boerne, Texas, for a second season, working from January 27 to April 6, 1883, during which time

he made 15 additions to his first list (of 104 birds), established range extensions, for that time, of the Chestnut-backed Bluebird and Texas Pyrrhuloxia and obtained new information concerning the occurrence of the White-throated Sparrow and Black-chinned Hummingbird in Texas. The report of this work was published in April, 1884 (*Auk*, 1: 120-124). This brought to a close his first period of collecting.

A second period began in December, 1903, and continued somewhat intermittently until 1913. The greater part of this work was done about Camden, Kershaw County, South Carolina, where he made full collections of winter birds, and a less extensive collection of spring and fall specimens in Coos County, New Hampshire.

Throughout his career as a field naturalist, Clifford Brown's aim was to make every specimen perfect according to his high standard of perfection. Perfection rather than quantity was his guide. He loved the objects of his work, admired and appreciated their beauty, bestowing upon them the most painstaking care, coupled with rare skill, in restoring the perfect adjustment of their plumages and life-like arrangement of their patterns of coloration. He collected thousands of specimens, yet neither his prowess as a collector nor his skill as a marksman were ever in evidence in his writings or his conversation; the dead bird was necessary to his purpose but never an object of conquest.

After the close of his first period of work as a field naturalist he lived abroad and travelled extensively in Europe for a decade or more. During the early years of the interim between his two collecting periods, he indulged in literary work, publishing numerous short papers in the literary journals of that time. These gracefully written epics, covering a wide range of subjects, proclaim a sympathetic analysis of human character and a masterful command of language at its best. Many of these articles were published under his own name, but a series of thirteen papers which appeared in the *Portland Advertiser*, stand under the pen name of 'Peregrinus.' Among these contributions may be mentioned one possessing historical value, entitled 'A Glimpse of Modern San Antonio' [Texas], which appeared in two parts in the *Portland Transcript* in November, 1883, under the author's name.

His ornithological papers seem to have begun in 1874, with a short note entitled, "From Maine," in the *American Sportsman*, for December 15, in which he presents records of the Canvasback and Red-head Ducks and the Turkey Vulture, all taken near Portland, an abundance of Pine Grosbeaks, and a brood of Ruffed Grouse

raised that year near his home within city limits, the latter the last known instance of the kind. Of his 104 ornithological titles, 67 appeared in the Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club and The Auk. His papers were written with great clearness and a pleasing modesty, the author's personality never dominating or even intruding on his subject.

In the scientific organizations in which he held memberships, he took a deep interest, being a helpful constituent and a wise councillor. He was elected to corresponding membership in the Nuttall Ornithological Club in October, 1876; to active membership in the Portland Society of Natural History in June, 1878, where he served as its Curator of Ornithology from January, 1881, to April, 1889, and as a member of its board of managers from 1884 to 1890. He was a Founder of The American Ornithologists' Union in 1883, and a member of its committee to investigate the status of the English Sparrow in North America, in 1884.

His larger collections are contained in the museums of Princeton University and the Portland Society of Natural History. The Princeton collection contains a part of his Alabama series, many of his earlier Maine specimens and most of those of his first Texas collection, including the type series of the Rock Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps eremoeca*). Mr. Brown assured the writer that no type, as now understood, was selected by him.

The Portland series is the private collection which he retained until preparing to go abroad; it was bestowed upon the local institution in 1888. This contains part of the Alabama collection, that of his second season in Texas and many of his Maine birds. To this he added part of the collection made in South Carolina.

For many years, Nathan Clifford Brown was unable to indulge in the pleasures and benefits of much reading, yet through the gift of a rare and unfailing memory and an ability to grasp and analyze current events, he kept himself well informed on the history and progress of American ornithology.

He was a man of small, finely proportioned stature, refined, dignified and gracious in appearance; erect in carriage throughout his long span of life. In speech fluent and rhetorical, yet he possessed a keen sense of humor and a merry laugh. Notwithstanding the physical restraint under which he lived, he was always cheerful and his presence was inspiring to the end.

Portland Society of Natural History
Portland, Maine