

Finally, the male of this last pair, after living in captivity for 26 years, died. Martha lived on; but later she became unable to fly as well as previously. Her perch had to be placed nearer to the ground in order to enable her to reach her roosting place. She was now 29 years old, an unusually old age in captivity. On the first day of September, 1914, at one o'clock in the afternoon, Martha was found lying on the ground, an inert mass.

The last Passenger Pigeon had gone like the 'Last of the Mohicans.' Nevermore was man to see any of the species in life. A reward of \$1000 was posted for a nest found with a fresh egg. Many persons sent in eggs of the Mourning Dove and those of the Band-tailed Pigeon, but not one of the Passenger Pigeon was ever afterward discovered. Thus passed one of the most interesting American birds.

The body of Martha, with a number of the larger feathers that had been saved when the bird was molting, were well packed in ice and sent to the United States National Museum in Washington, D. C. Mr. William Palmer, the taxidermist, removed the skin. Dr. Robert W. Shufeldt made an anatomical dissection and published a description of this (Auk, 32: 29-41, pls. 4-6, 1915), giving the cause of death as advanced age.

Martha is now on exhibition in the United States National Museum, a sad reminder of the once great glory of her vanished race.

---

### AN EARLY ILLINOIS RECORD OF "CORY'S LEAST BITTERN"

BY CHARLES KNAPP CARPENTER

ON June 1, 1909, I had the good fortune to take an odd example of "Cory's Least Bittern"—probably the first of two ever to be taken in Illinois. Now, thirty-seven years later, I am sending the belated news to the readers of *The Auk*. Possibly this long delay may make it more interesting now when it can be put over against the complete, though brief, history of this debated form as it is written upon the pages of *The Auk* over a period of about thirty years.

At the time of the capture of my bird, I was pastor of the First Methodist Church in Aurora, Illinois, and did my golfing with a camera over my shoulder, with a marsh for a golf-course and a suit of old clothes to protect me from the stagnant waters. A few miles west of Aurora, the Rob Roy Marsh was one of my favorite courses. It was less than 100 acres in extent but afforded perfect nesting conditions for numerous marsh-birds. Among the numerous nests were some thirty of the

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis exilis*). As I waded from one to another of the nests, to record whatever changes had taken place since my last visit, I saw a bird about four feet from me, hiding in the vegetation, in frozen attitude. It was breast toward me and so well concealed that I assumed it to be a common Least Bittern. Slowly getting the camera ready, I took two pictures to illustrate protective coloration. It is not very difficult to catch Least Bitterns when they are endeavoring to escape by hiding, and I thought to catch this one for further observation.

Moving forward very slowly and dimly realizing that it was an oddly colored bird, I was about to seize it when it started to fly. I knocked it down with my hand and easily caught it. To my surprise and delight I was holding a bird like a Least Bittern in most ways but black and white in color, with the white greatly predominating. I assumed it to be a male Least Bittern with patches of the normal black color remaining and the remainder of the body white—a splendid example of albinism. There was a slight wound on the elbow-joint of one of the wings with a fresh drop of blood on it. It did not impair the bird's motions. I surmised that a normally colored Least Bittern may have fought it because of its odd coloring and forced it down into the dense cover.

Taking it home I put it in a small bird-yard with some other marsh-birds (Green Herons, Least Bitterns, rails). These birds ate freely of chopped fresh beef, but the newcomer would not eat. This continued into the fourth day. Afraid that the bird would starve to death, Friday afternoon, June 4, I put the captive in a large box with a supply of small tadpoles in a pan of water. The bird was frantic for them, manifested no shyness whatever and ate greedily. Unfortunately I had an evening engagement out of the city and the next morning, when I returned, the bittern lay dead by the pan. I am confident that it gorged itself to death. The measurements were normal for a Least Bittern: length, 13.50 inches; length to tip of toes, 18 inches; wing, 4.80 inches; tail, 1.95 inches; tarsus, 1.60 inches; and extent, 16.90 inches. Because of the black coloring I assumed it to be a male bird, but upon skinning it I found it to be a female with swollen ova and swollen, flabby ovarian ducts. I am sure that the bird had laid its clutch of eggs. It then seemed to me that it must be a Cory's Least Bittern [*Ardetta neoxena* (Cory)] as it then was known, but an extremely albinistic example. I so labelled it, and it still wears that label which may be attributed to my laziness. The brief description of the coloring written at the time is as follows: "The bird is mostly pure white with several irregular black patches and some scattering

brown feathers. It is an extremely albinistic form and yet decidedly melanistic. While the general color of the bird is white, the back of the neck is dull black; also the interscapulars and wing coverts are irregularly dull black. A few brown feathers are scattered among the feathers of the lower neck, wing coverts and rump. The wings underneath are pure white with ONE tiny brown feather on the under side of the left wing. There is a patch of brownish feathers on the outer side of the right flank."

The day the bird was captured and several times later I worked the marsh diligently, hoping to find a nest with darker-colored eggs (such as some observers had reported) and a mate but without avail. The records that were kept on quite a list of Least Bitterns' nests threw no light on the story of my captured bird.

Now, sixty years after the first Cory's Least Bittern was found and some thirty years after the last one was taken, I have scanned the books and especially the volumes of *The Auk* since I became a member of the A. O. U. in 1894, assembling the material to see what kind of a bird this was supposed to be.

The first account and description of this bird is by Charles B. Cory and appeared in the April number of *The Auk* for 1886. The type-specimen, taken in 1885 and now in the Chicago Natural History Museum, was taken in the Lake Okeechobee marshes in southern Florida. Six others were taken in this locality, the last on August 15, 1891. These seem to be the only ones ever taken in Florida—all of them in a small area. This may be called the southern one of two colonies, albeit a very small one. One of the seven was a young bird, indicating nesting.

This first bird was given the name *Ardetta neoxena* and was at once accepted as a legitimate species. Coues accepted it as is indicated on page 888 of the appendix of the revised (3rd) edition of his 'Key' (1887). Ridgway in 'The Ornithology of Illinois' (1887) accepted the bird but changed the name to *Botaurus neoxenus*. *The Auk* for January, 1896, contains a splendid article by Frank M. Chapman that no person interested in this topic can afford to miss. There is a portrait of the typical bird, a list with data of the 14 birds taken up to that time, extensive descriptions and other information, an extensive bibliography, and an expression of his own attitude. At first he had considered it a color phase. Now he proved, to his own satisfaction at least, that it was a species in its own right. In 1896, Dr. Bowdler Sharpe admitted it into the 'Catalogue of Birds of the British Museum' then being published. Cory's 'Birds of Illinois and Wisconsin,' published in 1909, had a new name for the bird, *Ixobrychus neoxenus*,

and said that it had the blessing of the A. O. U. Committee on Nomenclature. In this book Cory said that the bird had not yet been observed in Illinois. I had taken my bird perhaps shortly before this but had not reported it. Barrows, the author of 'Michigan Bird Life,' gave the bird the same status but added this significant comment: "Several ornithologists have suggested that Cory's Bittern may prove to be simply a color phase of the Least Bittern." T. Gilbert Pearson, Editor in Chief of 'Birds of America,' published in 1923, still gave Cory's Least Bittern good standing. But in this same year, *The Auk* (40: 524, 1923) made the statement that the A. O. U. Committee on Nomenclature had eliminated Cory's Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus neoxenus*) because "considered only a color phase of *Ixobrychus exilis* (Gmelin)". After a period of 37 years spent on troubled waters, during which this bird had had three generic names to its credit, it ceased to exist as a species in the ornithological books. But it had actually ceased to exist nearly ten years before this time.

Let me now bring these birds actually taken into one picture. The Florida colony was the first mentioned, numbering seven birds. At the other end of the territory involved was another group numbering 16 birds in all. These birds were taken in "a small extent of marsh" joining Ashbridge's Bay, Toronto, Canada. The first bird was taken May 18, 1890; the last Sept. 8, 1899. There were three immature birds in this group. Chapman in *The Auk* for January, 1896, gave the data for six of these birds; Fleming in *The Auk* for January, 1902, gave the remainder. This "colony" ceased to exist in 1899. P. A. Taverner in an interesting article in *The Auk* for April, 1928, p. 205, explained the disappearance of the bird in this locality saying that the marsh "has been reclaimed, industrialized and destroyed as a marsh-bird habitat." Those reporting on these two groups, in telling of nests and eggs, say that the eggs of Cory's Least Bittern are considerably darker than the eggs of *Ardeetta exilis*. Here is another interesting phenomenon: the color phase involving the eggs of the birds in question.

In these two groups there are 20 adults and three young birds, taken over a period of 14 years, from 1885-1899. In addition to these, seven others from widely scattered areas have been taken. One of these was from the far east—Massachusetts (see *The Auk*, 12: 77, Jan., 1895). The others are from the midwest. One was taken in Wisconsin in 1896 (see *The Auk*, 13: 79, 1896). Two were taken in Michigan: my old friend, L. Whitney Watkins, took an adult male in Jackson County, August 8, 1894 (see *The Auk*, 12: 77, 1895), and later E. Craven took another on the St. Clair Flats (see *The Auk*, 77, Jan., 1905). In *The Auk*, 24: 338, 1907, Dr. Ruthven reported that

the University of Michigan Museum had received a specimen taken in Ohio.

And finally two were taken in Illinois; and if my checking is correct they are the last two ever taken. My specimen has been sufficiently mentioned: carrying the date June 1, 1909; an albino adult female, in the Rob Roy Marsh, west of Aurora, Illinois. And the last one of the list was reported in *The Auk*, 32: 98, January, 1915. This bird was taken by C. W. G. Eifrig in marshy land along the Fox River north of Elgin, Ill., about 60 miles north of where mine was taken.

Here, then, are 30 birds, 27 adults and three immature, found within a brief span of 30 years, 1885-1915. Perhaps there are a few others the data for which I have not found. But seemingly this will not change the picture very much. What has become of the Cory's Least Bittern as it was known? The years since 1915 have been years of much intensive collecting. While many marshes have been drained in the last 40 years, much remains and many normal Least Bitterns have continued to find nesting places. Why has not some collector found one of these variant forms?

The late P. A. Taverner, of the National Museum of Canada, in Ottawa, had an article in *The Auk*, 45: 204, April, 1928, protesting against the action of the Committee on Nomenclature but offering a unique theory to account for the disappearance of this bird: namely that these years mark the dying out of a species that had been long and well established. If one assumes this to be true he faces the puzzle as to why none of these birds had been found before 1885. If there were not as many collectors in the earlier years there were more birds, so the odds were even.

The coloration of these birds seems to present a greater problem than their disappearance. And the problem seems to be present whether we consider Cory's Least Bittern a distinct species or a variant form. The Committee on Nomenclature has given us its studied opinion and we may well accept that. But as a problem by itself, how can we explain this matter? Chapman accepted the status of the bird as a species but was frankly puzzled by the color variations. As one goes through the records in *The Auk* for these years he finds that many of the writers are likewise puzzled. Nearly every bird taken, besides being decidedly off-color if it is an *Ixobrychus exilis*, has other variations from the normal *Ixobrychus neoxenus*. Nearly every one of these birds shows some albinism, but there are no definite areas, there is no definite degree. There may be only one or two white feathers, with the remainder of the plumage as Cory described it, or there may be considerable areas involving nearly all of the body and in varying

degrees of whiteness. Moreover, in a few instances there are melanistic tendencies in which the same bird shows these contradictory manifestations. Nature is quite stern in drawing boundary lines and fixing limits. Why was she so lenient to this bird and how were the boundary lines removed?

*Baileyville*  
*Illinois*

---

PERCY ALGERNON TAVERNER, 1875-1947

BY W. L. MCATEE

*Plate 4*

WITH the demise of our esteemed Fellow, P. A. Taverner, at Ottawa, in early May, 1947, ended an era in Canadian ornithology that surely will bear his name. That of the Macouns, immediately preceding, was summarized by the father-and-son 'Catalogue of Canadian Birds' (1909) and by its French edition (1916). Taverner, in the early years of his service as Ornithologist to the Museum of the Geological Survey of Canada, became pleasantly associated with both of these scientists—with the father, John, until his retirement in 1912, and with the son, James M., until his death in 1920. Relations with the latter, Taverner notes, were "always intimate, cordial, and helpful."

The last of the Macoun works appeared, as indicated, in 1916, and James M. contributed information, advice, and editorial assistance toward Taverner's first Canadian bird book, the 'Birds of Eastern Canada' (297 pp., 50 col. pls.), which was published in 1919. The Macoun volumes were primarily annotated catalogues, but Taverner planned his books as more broadly educational. In the introduction of his first book, he states that it "has been written to awaken and, where it already exists, to stimulate an interest both aesthetic and practical, in the study of Canadian birds and to suggest the sentimental, scientific, and economic value of that study; to assist in the identification of native species; and to furnish the economist with a ready means of determining bird friend from bird foe that he may act intelligently towards them and to the best interest of himself and the country at large; to present in a readily accessible form reliable data upon which measures of protective legislation may be based . . ." (1919: 1). This plan was adhered to in all of his officially published books on the birds of Canada, a section on economic status being included for every group for which the necessary information was available.