

BOARDMAN CONOVER, 1892-1950

BY STEPHEN S. GREGORY, JR. AND A. L. RAND

BOARDMAN CONOVER was an ornithologist linking the days when private bird collections were of world importance and the present era when most important collections are in public institutions. By specializing in game birds, which for him included cranes, rails, tinamous, shore birds, doves, gallinaceous birds and ducks, Conover was able to build up an outstanding collection with a world coverage, and these he housed, and worked on, in the Chicago Natural History Museum. His modesty and his retiring habits limited the number of those who knew him well. But he was an excellent host, and his occasional game dinners at his apartment were a feature of the ornithological world in Chicago, both to local and visiting bird men. A wealth of correspondence with people in all parts of the world kept a stream of selected specimens trickling into his collection.

(Henry) Boardman Conover was born in Chicago, January 18, 1892, the youngest child of Charles Hopkins Conover and Della Louise Boardman Conover. He had three sisters: Elinor (now Mrs. Ralph W. Owen of Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Della B. (now Mrs. Eugene S. Talbot of Chicago) and Margaret B. His father was born in Easton, Pennsylvania, July 12, 1847, and moved to Chicago in 1871, where he engaged in business and became president of the hardware firm of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Co. The name Conover evolves from Van Couwenhoven, and Wolfert Van Couwenhoven was the first member of the family to settle in America, coming from Amersfoort, The Netherlands, in 1630. His mother was born in Marietta, Iowa, October 31, 1859. Her father, Henry E. J. Boardman, was a lawyer, who before moving West graduated from Dartmouth and taught for a time in an eastern college.

Conover's preparatory education was received in the Chicago Latin School and the Hill School, Pottstown, Pennsylvania. He then attended the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale, receiving the degree of Ph.B. in 1912. His training was in civil engineering, and in this capacity he served with the United States Reclamation Service in Las Cruces, New Mexico, from 1912-1913, and then practiced engineering for a short time with the Pennsylvania Railroad, living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was followed by a few years of business experience with the Stewart Manufacturing Company in Chicago. Then in World War I he served overseas in France, as 1st Lieutenant in the

332 Regiment of Field Artillery with the 86th Division of the United States Army.

From early boyhood Boardman Conover had been interested in living things. As such boys do, he collected cocoons and birds' eggs, and kept pets which ranged from white rats to parrots and chameleons. His father, a successful business man, had no interest in hunting, or in wildlife. But he was sympathetic with his son's interests and encouraged him in many ways. He provided him with a variety of pets, and from the time he was nine years old sent him to a boys' camp in Wisconsin for part of each summer. Books were one of his father's main outside interests, and this is reflected in his having handsomely bound some of the early bird pamphlets his son secured.

Late in 1904 Boardman's father introduced him to Fred Surkamer, the head gunsmith for Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Co. This was a contact of far reaching importance. The immediate result was a special shotgun to fit the frame of the 12-year-old boy. But also Boardman and Surkamer became friends and soon Mr. Conover planned a shooting trip for the two. It was Surkamer, a man of high ideals and a capable sportsman, who taught the boy to shoot, instilled in him the rules and ethics of the game, and directed his awakening interest in sport. In line with this, Boardman's father, in 1914, arranged for his son's election to the Swan Lake Club, Illinois, where he continued to shoot ducks each fall.

His guns, his bird dogs, his bird shooting, and his library of sporting books were interests that continued throughout his life. As a young man all his spare time was spent with them. His shooting records, in which every day's bag is entered with date, place, gun used, and the number of individuals of each kind of game begins with one gray squirrel shot in Virginia on November 16, 1904 (when he was 12 years old) with a borrowed gun. The next year, on April 5, 1905 (spring shooting was legal then) is entered his first bag of birds—one Lesser Scaup and two Coots shot with his own 16-gauge Parker in Illinois.

From then on not a year is missed in the record. Before he was out of school he had ranged as far afield as South Dakota for ducks, and Wyoming for Sage Grouse. In later years he travelled to Texas, Utah, South Dakota, and Saskatchewan for game birds. For the period he was on active service in France the record is tenuous, but it includes such things as the European Woodcock and the European Coot. It continues until 1950, when the Bob-white Quail shot during his last winter in Florida are entered.

Big game interested him little. Though in 1919 and 1920 he travelled to Yukon to shoot sheep, caribou, bear, and moose he took a

shotgun and shot birds whenever possible. In mentioning certain aspects of these trips, important points that came to his mind were of specimens he had been unable to shoot because the guide feared the shots would alarm big game.

It was probably in 1919 that Conover met Dr. W. H. Osgood, then assistant curator of mammalogy and ornithology of the Field Museum as it was known at that time. This was a turning point in Conover's life. Not particularly happy in business, and with means enough to make it unnecessary for him, a new and more satisfying life appeared for him. Hitherto his interests in game birds had been that of a sportsman. Under Osgood's influence he learned how to collect and study them. The first fruit of this was a collecting trip for the Museum to Venezuela in early 1920, with Dr. Osgood. It was on this trip that Conover, who did the game bird collecting, learned to make scientific specimens. In 1918, in the diary of his Yukon hunting trip he writes of attempting to make bird skins, but most of them were thrown away. Apparently only a single specimen survived these efforts, a Willow Ptarmigan. But on the Venezuela trip, under Osgood's tutorage, Conover made a collection of 133 specimens. The next step was study of the material collected and with Osgood he prepared a report on the collection, that was subsequently published. This confirmed his decision to abandon business and to embark on ornithology as a full-time career. As he wrote Osgood about this time, "During our recent trip to Venezuela I became seriously interested in the formation of a special study collection of game birds." In July, 1920, arrangements were made whereby the collection was to be housed in the Chicago Natural History Museum (then the Field Museum), which proved to be its permanent home. Thus was the collection started. Conover's next trip, in the autumn of 1920, was to Yukon, ostensibly for big game, but birds received more attention than did big game, and a collection of just over 100 bird skins resulted.

Two years later, in 1922, Conover took part in another Museum expedition to South America, again with Dr. Osgood and with Mr. Colin C. Sanborn (now curator of mammals). After spending some time in Chile they left Mr. Sanborn there, and Dr. Osgood and Conover went on to collect in Argentina; they made a short stop, but did no collecting, in Brazil on the way home in 1923.

In 1924 Conover spent the spring and summer in the Hooper Bay area of Alaska with Mr. H. W. Brandt of Cleveland and Mr. O. J. Murie. Here Conover specialized in game birds, especially downy young, and published the results of this trip in 'The Auk' for 1926. In January, 1925, he made a short trip into Mexico.

In 1926 Conover, in cooperation with Mr. R. H. Everard of Detroit, financed an expedition to east Africa, on which they were accompanied by Mr. John T. Zimmer, then assistant curator of birds of the Museum staff, and collected in Tanganyika Territory, Belgian Congo, and Uganda, leaving the country via Mombasa.

Expedition life, much as he enjoyed it, was not for Conover. His health ruled it out. He was never really well after his African trip. On it he had an attack of what was diagnosed as intestinal malaria, and this continued for many years a drain on his strength. He developed asthma about 1942 and it became progressively more severe. Neither the high altitude of Wyoming nor the damp air at sea level in Florida gave him any real relief. Except for a short trip, by plane, to Mexico in March, 1931, he did not again leave the confines of the United States and Canada.

But by 1927 his collection numbered more than 6000 specimens of 700 species. By judicious purchase, financing collectors, and exchanges it continued to grow. Conover was ever alert to know of new collectors, people he could write to in areas from which he wanted birds, the location of rare and desirable specimens and persons who would collect about their own localities or make small expeditions into fruitful areas.

As Conover's interest was game birds, sportsmen, army officers, missionaries, a host of people over the globe, anyone interested in shooting might recognize and know from descriptions his special needs. It necessitated a lot of letter writing, but it was productive. He sometimes said that if he got specimens from but a small proportion of the people to whom he wrote, he thought he was doing well. It was thus he got many of his specimens, and even at the time of his death there were on the way to him collections from small expeditions he had financed in Nepal and Colombia.

The Conover collection of game birds contains about 18,000 specimens, including about 30 types. In certain groups, such as the francolins of Africa, Conover considered it to have the best representation extant.

Conover joined the American Ornithologists' Union in 1920 and was elected a Fellow in 1947. He was also a member of the British Ornithologists' Union, the Cooper Ornithological Club, the Wilson Ornithological Club, American Geographical Society and the Biological Society of Washington. In Chicago he was a member of the University Club of Chicago, the Camp Fire Club of Chicago, the local naturalists' group known as the Kennicott Club, and was a Trustee of the Chicago Zoological Society. In meetings Conover was extremely



*Sincerely
Boardman Conover*

reticent in expressing his views but, as those who talked with him knew, he had sound ones. His modesty was such that he hesitated to try to force them on others. Only once did he present a paper, to the Kennicott Club, on the birds of Hooper Bay, Alaska, after his trip there in 1924.

Throughout his ornithological career Conover worked closely with the Chicago Natural History Museum where his collections were housed. He never married. He and his sister, Margaret, lived together in an apartment in Chicago during most of his life, and her sympathetic understanding and unselfish advice contributed greatly to his accomplishments. Here in his apartment he had a study where his business and much of his correspondence were carried on. But daily when in Chicago he came into the Museum to work with his collection. In 1924 he was placed on the staff as an honorary associate; in 1936 he was appointed research associate. In 1940 he was invited to a place on the Board of Trustees of the Museum where he served until his death.

While Conover's main interest was in game birds, he was generous in the extreme in purchasing general collections, keeping the game birds for his own collection and donating the non-game birds to the Museum; if, as he used to say, 10 per cent of the collection was game birds he was satisfied and the Museum benefited richly through this. Through many such gifts he variously became a Patron, a Corporate Member, and finally on his death when his collection, his library, and a fund to support bird work came to the Museum, a Benefactor. The exhibition hall of birds which contains the systematic series has been dedicated as the Boardman Conover Hall.

The facts of occurrence, identification, and variation rather than theories interested Conover. His methods of working, with a card index of his collection, and an interleaved, annotated British Museum Catalogue enabled him to tell in a moment what was in his collection, what had been described, and gave him the pertinent references.

Thoroughness and conscientiousness marked his work. He spared no effort in gathering material, and whenever possible borrowed types for comparison. Mistakes and discrepancies in published works bothered him greatly, and he tried to avoid them in his own. His main interests were in his collection. The problems on which he published were directly related to it, especially when he could not lay out specimens so that they fitted published data; then he published, forced to it as it were.

Conover's publications numbered about 38. Two of these dealt with his expeditions, the one to Venezuela, the other to Alaska. Most of

his other papers were descriptions of new forms or revisions of species. In all he named about 20 new forms. Conover's greatest work was the completing of the final four volumes of the "Catalogue of the Birds of the Americas." This "Catalogue," begun by Charles B. Cory who completed two volumes, was continued by Hellmayr until his death in 1944.

Conover's friendly association with Dr. Hellmayr at the Museum, at first perhaps more admiration for his knowledge and attainments, ripened into a deep friendship. To complete the "Birds of the Americas" became a labor of love. The 15 volumes of this classical work, an indispensable tool of the working ornithologist, remain a monument to Cory, Hellmayr and Conover.

Conover's library was not extensive; he depended on the Museum library for most of the necessary reference works and helped in their acquisition. He had a few standard works such as the British Museum's "Catalogue of Birds," the game volumes of which he had interleaved and kept annotated up to date, and pertinent reprints from certain publications, which he kept arranged by journals. The balance was largely composed of fine books well illustrated dealing with game birds, hunting, and dogs.

His love of shooting and of dogs continued throughout later life. Each autumn he spent a few days duck shooting at Swan Lake in Illinois, and he always had a few bird dogs boarded near the city, which he visited weekends. For many years after joining the Museum he made longer hunting trips afield, to the Dakotas or the Canadian Prairies for upland shooting. But in recent years, partly because of poor health, he abandoned these and parts of each winter were spent in milder climates, often in Florida, where he enjoyed quail shooting and fishing. Though these were sporting trips he sometimes saved unusual or fine specimens, and on one of his last trips to Swan Lake in 1949 he brought back a bird whose plumage indicated it to be an intersex Mallard, and had a formal dissection in the bird division to settle the matter. With the restriction on local hunting and decrease in quality, he tried shooting on local pheasant preserves, but he found it a poor substitute for the wider fields he had hunted.

Though long troubled with asthma and digestive trouble, his death on May 5, 1950, from heart failure brought on by pneumonia, at Passavant Hospital, Chicago, came as a surprise as well as a shock to his friends.

To properly evaluate a man at close range, in both time and space, is difficult. The Conover we knew was a man of steadfast purpose and persistent industry, a conscientious worker who asked little, but gave

freely when asked, and an authority in his chosen field. His memory as a cheery friend, and an unassuming and congenial colleague may fade. His papers, even the monumental "Birds of the Americas," will go out of date. But the Conover collection of game birds will be consulted and studied through the years by others, and his efforts in bringing them together will be a hidden part of much future scientific work.

Box N., Winnetka, Illinois, and Chicago Natural History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, August 11, 1950.

THE NESTS AND EGGS OF *MESOENAS UNICOLOR* OF MADAGASCAR

BY A. L. RAND

THE special interest attached to this bird is that it is one of the three species (the other two are *Mesoenas variegata* and *Monias benschi*) included in the peculiar Madagascar family Mesoenatidae. Lowe (1924: 1151) suggested that this family of small, generalized and primitive birds might merit having a separate order erected for them, but he recognized gruiform relationships, and currently it is placed usually as a family of the Gruiformes.

The nest, but not the eggs of *Mesoenas unicolor*, was described by Milne Edwards and Grandidier (1879: 603) under the name *Mesites variegata* and somewhat differently by Lavauden (1931: 395-400).

When Mr. Harry Hoogstraal was in Madagascar in 1948 with the Blood Survey Group, Office of Naval Research, United States Navy, his party found two nests of *Mesoenas unicolor* and collected the eggs and the parent birds. These have come to the Chicago Natural History Museum along with Mr. Hoogstraal's notes on the nests; they permit certain additions to the knowledge concerning this bird. These nests were found at Bemangidy, Poste Mananteina, Fort Dauphin district in the extreme southeastern part of the island. Bemangidy is 72 kilometers north of Fort Dauphin and is about five miles west of the Indian Ocean. The country is hilly and apparently was originally covered with rain forest, though part of this is now being cut down. Both nests were in the rain forest where a thin cover of shrubs and few herbs grew below the trees. The nests were about a half-mile apart. Each nest was in a fork of a sloping tree, one about three feet above the ground, the other almost six feet above the ground. In each case the lower trunk of the tree had a number of low branches on it, on which it might have been possible for the bird to hop up to the nest.