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ON A COLLECTION OF BIRDS FROM GEORGIA AND CAROLINA MADE ABOUT 1810 BY JOHN ABBOT

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In 1810 the Zoological Museum of Berlin University was founded, and the indefatigable Dr. Carl Illiger became its director. At that time, his interest had turned to birds and mammals from all parts of the world. The ornithological collection, however, with which he had to start consisted chiefly of European and Brazilian birds. The latter had been given by the Count Johann Centurius von Hoffmannsegg, Illiger's friend and promoter, who, while in Portugal, had sent a special collector to the Lower Amazonas in 1801. After an absence of almost 11 years, this man, Friedrich Wilhelm Sieber, returned to Berlin in June, 1812, bringing with him not only what he had collected in the State of Pará during the last years, but also a good many bird skins from New South Wales and the United States. He had exchanged Brazilian skins for these on his way home, when circumstances had compelled him in 1811 to stay for some time in London. (See Illiger's letter to C. J. Temminck, dated 14 September 1812, and published by Stresemann, 1950: 135-136.) Particulars about Sieber's London arrangements have not yet been disclosed; but I was able to show that the Australian skins which he had obtained there were part of George Caley's important collection formed in the vicinity of Parramatta between 1801 and 1810 (Stresemann, 1951a: 70).

The North American birds by which the young collection of the Berlin Museum became increased had been labelled "Georgia" and "Carolina." They included 93 species and 130 specimens—perhaps the most complete local collection that had been shipped from the United States to Europe.

Like all new material from other countries, these North American birds were at once carefully studied by Illiger. When labelling them, their collector had not only stated the region ("Georgia" or "Caro-

lina"), but had, at least in some cases, added a vernacular designation and may even have quoted a scientific name from Gmelin or Latham, augmented by references to the works of Catesby, Edwards, and Buffon. This, however, is not certain, because the original labels have not been preserved, and the catalogue of August, 1813, to be mentioned below, does not make any distinction between the text of the labels and Illiger's additions. Among the latter, one notices references to the manuscript of Marcgrave, preserved in the Royal Library, Berlin, and to a manuscript on the animal life of Louisiana, Florida, etc. written by Professor Joseph Märter of Vienna, who had been there about 1785.

Illiger was not acquainted with Vieillot's "Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de l'Amérique septentrionale" (1807-1808), nor had he seen Wilson's "American Ornithology" (Vol. I-VI, 1808-1812). This explains why he gave new names to some species recently described by these authors. Before being able to publish his taxonomic results, this brilliant systematist died of consumption on May 10, 1813. (A biography of Illiger is included in Stresemann, 1951b.)

He was succeeded by Dr. Hinrich Lichtenstein, a vain and superficial person with hardly any experience in taxonomy, who at once started writing a new inventory of the ornithological collection of the Berlin Museum (960 species), thereby copying all remarks of Illiger which he could assemble. This task he completed in August, 1813, but only after ten or more years were some of the new specific names which Illiger had given to North American birds published by Lichtenstein or other German authors, with or without a diagnosis added. Three of these have been incorporated in the A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds: *Fringilla* [*Aimophila*] *aestivalis* Lichtenstein 1823 ("Georgia"), *Troglodytes* [*Cistothorus*] *stellaris* Naumann 1823 ("Carolina"), and *Regulus satrapa* Lichtenstein 1823 ("Am. sept."); others, like *Ardea adspersa* Illiger for *Botaurus lentiginosus* (Montagu 1813), appear in the synonymies.

To disclose the identity of the collector had been my aim for many a year, when finally the perusal of Mrs. E. G. Allen's "History of American Ornithology before Audubon" (1951) resulted in the discovery of a promising track. The writer devotes a special chapter (pp. 543-549) to "John Abbot of Georgia" (1751-1840?), in which she combines a variety of biographical notes, derived from many sources, to draw an interesting sketch of his life and work.

After having lived at other places in Georgia since 1776, John Abbot made Savannah his residence in 1806 and there occupied himself with studying insects and drawing birds in color (Basset, 1938). Mrs.

Allen was able to trace five different sets of drawings of Georgia birds from Abbot's able brush, three in England and two in the United States. One, the DeRenne set, was dated 1797; another, the Egerton set, was dated 1804; and a third, the Boston set, was drawn between 1800 and 1810 and represented about 190 species (Faxon, 1896).

It was generally believed that Abbot used to make drawings of the birds which he had secured, without preserving their skins, and this may have been true up to February and March of 1809 when Alexander Wilson payed a visit to Savannah and became Abbot's friend. Writing about his new species *Muscicapa solitaria* [= *Vireo solitarius* (Wilson)], Wilson remarks: "It is occasionally found in the State of Georgia, where I saw a drawing of it in the possession of Mr. Abbot, who considered it a very scarce species. He could give me no information of the female." But soon afterward Abbot started forming a bird collection. This becomes apparent from a letter which he wrote to George Ord from his new residence in Scriven County, Georgia, in March, 1814, (and published by Witmer Stone, 1906), wherein he stated: "At the commencement of the war [in 1812] I had undertaken to make a collection of stuffed Birds & as a complete collection of Drawings of them in colors as I was able for a Gentleman in England but last fall in despair of seeing peace restored, I retired into the Country after having made about 220 Drawings throwed away a large collection of stuffed skins, have entirely laid it aside, & entered into another line of employment, where I am in hopes the mad and destructive Ambition of the rulers of the world can but little interfere." And Wilson wrote to Abbot from Philadelphia on 23 January 1812: "Dear Sir, I this day rec'd . . . 4 Birds viz. the small Crow, female solitary Flycatcher, and the male and female Ground dove all in good order. The Crow and the Flycatcher I had already figured. The other two were very welcome; . . . Please to send the Chuck wills widow (male) and egg, and the beautiful rare Sparrow you mention, also the striped Wren." (The latter probably referred to *Cistothorus stellaris*.)

There are several means for testing the theory that it was John Abbot who had formed the "Sieber" collection of North American birds.

1.) The localities. These are given as Georgia, or Carolina, without exception. Savannah lies on the Savannah River which separates these states.

2.) The species represented. They include the very local Pine-woods Sparrow [*Aimophila aestivalis* (Lichtenstein)], which in later years was taken by J. Leconte near Savannah. They further include

Vireo solitarius (Wilson 1810), a drawing of which had been shown to Wilson by Abbot.

3.) The vernacular names. These are: "Summer Sparrow" for *Aimophila aestivalis*; "Yellow-pinioned Sparrow" for *Ammodramus savannarum pratensis* (Vieillot 1817), named by Illiger (in MS) *Fringilla xanthocampter*; "Red Sparrow" for *Passerella iliaca*; "Spotted Grass-Sparrow" for *Passerherbulus caudacutus*; "Cinereous headed Flycatcher" for *Vireo solitarius* (Wilson 1810), named by Illiger (in MS) *Lanius poliocephalus*; "Rust-spotted-back's Warbler" for ? ; "Red-streaked headed Woodpecker" for *Dendrocopos borealis* (Vieillot 1807), named by Illiger (in MS) *Picus leucotis*; "Barred-tailed Sandpiper" for *Tringa solitaria* Wilson 1813, named by Illiger *Tringa* sp.? It is to be hoped that these vernacular names will one day be compared with the English names given on the Abbot drawings. In the list of the DeRenne plates (1797) published by Rhoads (1918) *Tringa solitaria* is called "Barred tail Sandpiper" on pl. 13, and *Aimophila aestivalis*, is called "Summer Sparrow" on pl. 93, while *Passerella iliaca* appears as "Fox coloured sparrow" (pl. 54), *Ammodramus savannarum pratensis* as "Yellow winged Sparrow" (pl. 97), and *Vireo solitarius* as "Solitary Flycatcher" (pl. 114).

4.) The period (1811) and place (London) of sale. It is a well-known fact that Abbot, British-born like Alexander Wilson, had a correspondent in London who helped him sell his drawings and natural history collections. This was the "silversmith to royalty" and entomologist, John Francillon. In December, 1809, Francillon sold forty-four of Abbot's bird drawings to the Manchester Library (see Allen, 1951: 548).

The combination of evidence renders it safe to assume that it was John Abbot who collected these 93 species of birds from Georgia and Carolina. The type locality of *Aimophila aestivalis*, *Cistothorus stellaris*, and *Regulus regulus satrapa* may therefore be restricted to "Vicinity of Savannah, Georgia."

Most of these 130 specimens of historical value were still well preserved in the Zoological Museum of Berlin, when, on 3 February, 1945, three air bombs exploded in one of the halls of the ornithological department, destroying several thousands of mounted birds. A dozen or more of those which will henceforth remain connected with the venerable name of John Abbot fortunately escaped destruction. These include the types of *Aimophila aestivalis* and *Cistothorus stellaris* and a beautiful male Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*). Of this pioneer's skill in dressing birds no other proofs are known to exist in the whole world.

SUMMARY

While staying in London in 1811, Friedrich Wilhelm Sieber, collector for the Count of Hoffmannsegg received, in exchange for Brazilian skins, 130 bird skins of 93 species from Georgia and Carolina. The following year they were deposited in the Zoological Museum of the Berlin University and immediately studied by Dr. Carl Illiger who named those which he believed new to science. From his MS notes the names *Fringilla* [*Aimophila*] *aestivalis*, *Troglodytes* [*Cistothorus*] *stellaris*, and *Regulus satrapa* were published in 1823, combined with technical descriptions. The types of the two first-named species are still preserved in the Zoological Museum, Berlin.

The collection had apparently been made about 1810 by John Abbot, who was at that time staying in Savannah, Georgia. Detailed evidence for this theory is presented. Other than those preserved in Berlin, no birds collected and stuffed by John Abbot are known to exist in any museum.

The type locality of *Aimophila aestivalis*, *Cistothorus stellaris*, and *Regulus regulus satrapa* may now be restricted to "Vicinity of Savannah, Georgia."

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