

IN MEMORIAM: ADRIAAN JOSEPH VAN ROSSEM

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ADRIAAN VAN ROSSEM was a colorful, dynamic and highly competent ornithologist of international reputation who was lost while at the crest of his accomplishments at the age of 56. I knew him well from daily companionship in the field and from long professional contact. In the six years since his death, while thinking back over the events of his life, I have become convinced that his distaste for any show of sentimentalism and his inclination for blunt and incisive appraisal of self and others reflected a desire that his career be recorded with candor. "Van" was a man of startling and often puzzling contrasts. Personal charm and consideration shown toward some people were balanced against thoughtlessness and bitterness toward others. Generous acclaim and support of colleagues was often warmly expressed by him while competitive feuds grew apace in other quarters. And one can note that skillful cultivation of some lines of support and backing seemed not in keeping with his self-declared lack of diplomacy. Accurate, sensitive, and significant scientific work alternated with hasty, emotionally promulgated offerings. Nothing was ever gray or indecisive; matters were always black or white, or red. The most constant feature of his make up, and one to be deeply admired by every ornithologist, was a complete and never-lagging interest in birds. Nothing else really mattered; all other things could ruthlessly be put aside. The buoyancy of his enthusiasm in the field and the museum seemed undiminished in his last years from that of the youthful twelve-year-old collector operating in the Arroyo Seco near Pasadena.

Adriaan Joseph van Rossem was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 17, 1892, the son of Adriaan Cornelis van Rossem and Josephine Williams van Rossem. His father was a member of a family well known in municipal and business circles in Rotterdam, Holland, and in the Dutch East Indies. Following residence in London he had come to Chicago as a convenient point for international business exchange. A. C. van Rossem had had European collegiate training and possessed excellent linguistic ability. On November 11, 1891, he married Josephine Williams. Her father, Joseph Williams of Goderich, Ontario, was engaged in timber, manufacturing, and shipping business in the Great Lakes area and was widely known for his interest in educational institutions. In August of 1894, A. C. van Rossem's health occasioned alarm and visits to Holland and Switzerland followed, for medical care and rest. He died on



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February 6, 1895, at Leysin sur Aigle in Switzerland and the widow and her two small boys, ages 1 and 2½, returned to Canada. In September, 1895, Mrs. van Rossem took up residence in California and built a house overlooking the Arroyo Seco in Pasadena. Here the children were raised by her, and young Adriaan attended public and private schools, entering Throop Institute (then a preparatory and high school, later to become California Institute of Technology) in 1903 where he was encouraged and counseled in his interest as a naturalist by Joseph Grinnell. Following Grinnell's move to Berkeley, California, in 1908, van Rossem and he corresponded regularly, and an exchange of letters in January of 1914 reflected the guidance Grinnell gave and its cordial reception. On January 9 Grinnell wrote in part: "I am frank to state that I consider your article excellently written [van Rossem's fifth published article, on the Derby Flycatchers he observed in El Salvador in 1912]. It shows at the same time a high grade of observational ability. If you can turn out work of this good quality with relatively little preliminary experience, I would say that you would make a mistake in not following up this line of work and thus put your talents to good use." Grinnell was aware of Van's various youthful escapades and was here making a sincere bid to encourage a life-time focus of interest which was already strongly indicated. Van responded on January 14: "Your criticism of my paper and the remarks concerning my future were decidedly encouraging to me. I will keep the corrected article to use as a key to the composition of the next one, as that which I just sent in got me 'het up' considerably."

Van's earliest field work outside the Pasadena area included collecting trips to the Coronados Islands in April of 1909 (age 16) with James B. Dixon, to the Salton Sea region in the winter of 1910-11, and to Santa Cruz Island in the spring of 1911 with A. Brazier Howell. There grew from this last association a plan to collect in El Salvador, Central America, especially to procure species on "the North American list." Later (1938) in writing of this sojourn in the tropics which extended from February 10 to August 20, 1912, he said: "I . . . made a small collection of birds, the gathering of which must be confessed was conducted with a large amount of youthful enthusiasm combined with a minimum of judgment." On February 16 he wrote Grinnell that he arrived in San Salvador "after a considerable tussle with the customs people. . . . Everything is OK now and I am armed with several dozen permits. . . . Of course I am at sea at present, all the birds with exception of a few migrants being absolutely new to me." Thus he was launched on a life-time work on the fascinating

study of tropical birds in a fashion and under circumstances not dissimilar to the introductions still experienced with relish by many ornithologists on their first trip to Latin America.

In early 1913 a "near-to-nature idea" of the family led to the purchase of a ten-acre ranch in Pomona. Van did not like the ranch work and a year later in February reported "we have sold this — walnut ranch at a substantial profit and for my part never want another. I would rather collect a year than ride a cultivator a week." Van was already firmly established as a skilled and vigorous preparator and field man. Accordingly for the year 1914–1915 (October 15 to June 5) he was commissioned by J. Eugene Law to collect for him in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona. An extraordinarily fine collection was assembled which for many years was on deposit at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology but which recently has been removed to Virginia by its owner, Mrs. Laura Law Bailey. No publications resulted from this work as van Rossem and Law fell into strong disagreement concerning the conduct of it and appropriate compensation. This conflict of two determined personalities unfortunately persisted in various manifestations and colored many of Van's later relations with ornithologists in southern California.

From 1915 to 1917 Van worked in mining and real estate enterprises which took him for some time to Sierra City in the Sierra Nevada. His true interests are reflected in his statement of October 5, 1916, to Grinnell "that there was very little time to collect anything the past summer but by hunting before breakfast and skinning after supper I managed to prepare about three hundred." He also worked in 1917 for the B. F. Goodrich Company with Chester C. Lamb in their touring bureau as road markers and inspectors.

In April of 1917 Adriaan and his brother Walter Johannes (Jack) enlisted in the United States Army, and following training at San Diego and at Fort Lewis, Washington, Adriaan entered officers candidate school in November and worked out his war service in Georgia. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant on June 5, 1918, and First Lieutenant on November 19, serving as commander of a machine gun company until May, 1919, when he left the regular Army for the Reserves and returned to California.

In the fall of 1919 the association with Donald R. Dickey began. Dickey had been an invalid following his college years but wrote in 1926 of his subsequent enterprises as follows: (Harris, *Condor*, 36: 62, 1934) "I awoke about 1916 to find myself a thoroughly husky individual, but too interested by that time in what started as a hobby, to forego it for a conventional business life. . . . When

I came west, Southern California utterly lacked a research museum effort. I was keen about Southern California and about research in vertebrate zoology, and determined to do what I could to further the establishment of a research center in the latter field. In the effort I have built up a study collection of nearly thirty thousand specimens [nearly doubled by 1932, the year of his death] of mammals and birds, with a fair working library. . . . We are now head over heels in the Central American field, and I chafe to be off for my first taste of collecting in the tropical jungles." This was the setting of "the Dickey Institution" and the association Van had with it for 13 years. As far as the ornithological part of the enterprise was concerned, Van was the principal builder and contributor of ornithological data and writings. Dickey supplied the vision, diplomacy, balance, finance, and not an inconsiderable scholarship to the Dickey and van Rossem team, but Van supplied terrific drive, field enthusiasm, intimate life-long acquaintance with birds, and taxonomic sensitivity. The combination of talents was a happy one and as such is recorded by Van in the preface to "The Birds of El Salvador." This book which represented Van's finest effort and which won the Brewster award in 1941, was written entirely by Van who stated: "Since his [Dickey's] death I have gone over the entire paper and have changed it here and there in order to have it accord with his expressed ideas and wishes. For this as well as for personal reasons, it has seemed fitting that Mr. Dickey be regarded as joint [senior] author. That this may serve as a concrete indication of our long and friendly association in ornithological work is my sincere desire."

In this period, beside the many short and preliminary publications basic to the El Salvador report and other long-range undertakings, van Rossem produced such sound and important papers as "A Study of Some Plumages of the Black Tern" (1923), "A Survey of the Song Sparrows of the Santa Barbara Islands" (1924), "The Races of *Sitta pygmaea* Vigors" (1929), and "Critical Notes on Some Yellowthroats of the Pacific Southwest" (1930).

This period was also one of intensive field work in southern California, Baja California, southern Nevada, Sonora, and El Salvador. I had the good fortune as a youngster to spend a whole summer (1922) with Van at Buena Vista Lake, California, as camp helper (can opener) and boatman, and again I worked with him in 1925 and his field colleague, R. A. Stirton, in El Salvador as well as on shorter local trips. Van's assistance to Stirton and to me in learning hunting and skinning techniques was a great help, his command of practical affairs and

obliviousness to vicissitudes an object lesson to a young naturalist, and his zeal and imagination in seeking ornithological data an inspiration. I was proud that he could use my ears as an aid in collaborative hunting and I found him always helpful and considerate to a beginner unless momentarily preoccupied with an ornithological pursuit. The Dickey Institution in Pasadena was a rendezvous when we were not in the field. It drew me as a magnet because of its vigor and the beauty of the collections that were fast building, an attraction it had also for Loye Miller.

During van Rossem's years with Donald Dickey, they repeatedly sought arrangements whereby Van might obtain college training. In 1928 this led to enrollment in Occidental College in Los Angeles. A considerable experience in liberal arts was received over a period of some three years which coupled with his natural skill in languages gave him desirable scholarly background. The technical training in zoology although helpful was not as extensive as he would have desired. Later, in 1948, in recognition of Van's research attainments, Occidental College awarded him an honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

With the death of Donald Dickey in 1932, the Dickey enterprise, then temporarily housed at the California Institute of Technology, was left with no assured future. Financial support was slight and impermanent, and in the uncertain depression years, new opportunities for a professional position for van Rossem seemed non-existent. This situation coupled with the break-up in divorce in 1934 of his first marriage of 1918 to Grace Coolidge created tensions and uncertainties of the most distracting kind. Yet through all this Van continued to produce in research. Encouragement and aid from Clinton G. Abbott of the San Diego Natural History Society helped. And some of his undertakings in the mid-thirties were supported by the Marquess Hachisuka of Japan who for a time was resident in southern California.

Mrs. Dickey maintained minimal support for Van, however, until 1940, at which time a cooperative arrangement was made, chiefly through the interests and efforts of Loye Miller, whereby the University of California at Los Angeles would receive the Dickey Collections and in 1943 would assume full support of them and of van Rossem. In 1940, therefore, the collections were transferred to the University and housed on its Clark Library property, and van Rossem held the title in the University of Curator of the Dickey Collection (later Senior Museum Zoologist) with the added designation of Lecturer in Zoology in 1946 which permitted a limited participation in the

training of advanced students. Not until long after van Rossem's death in 1949 did the tremendously valuable collections, numbering in the order of 60,000 specimens of birds, find adequate fireproof housing on the University campus in Westwood, there to be cared for by van Rossem's successor as curator, Dr. Thomas R. Howell.

The research of the 1930's and 1940's focused more and more on northwestern México. It led to van Rossem's definitive and valuable book on the birds of Sonora, a distributional survey, that was published in 1945. This was part of an even larger program intended to elucidate the faunal relations of birds on both sides of the Gulf of California and of the deserts of the southwestern United States. With the publication of the book on Sonora, this state became the first mainland area of México for which there was a comprehensive digest of literature, field work, and taxonomic and distributional data. In reviewing this report in the *Condor* (1946: 98-99) we noted that van Rossem "on taxonomic matters tends to be a positivist. Consequently . . . he has had to reverse himself on a number of stands which were taken earlier. A saving virtue is the ability to change when new evidence demands."

Initiation of the work on Sonora came through the acquisition by Donald Dickey of large collections made in that state by John T. Wright starting in 1929. Van Rossem's acquaintance with the area began in earnest in the period from 1930 to 1932 with field trips to the Guaymas district and offshore islands. In 1937 he travelled and collected through the length and breadth of the state and even as the report was being concluded and after its publication, up to 1948, he was taking every opportunity for short expeditions to Sonora or bordering areas. Several of these trips were in company with Loye Miller, for whom they were always a source of much pleasure. Van's consideration in helping him to participate in field work for many years after his retirement was deeply appreciated.

The efforts to perfect the taxonomy of Mexican and Central American birds led to a desire on Van's part to examine types and other critical specimens in Europe and especially to work over the wealth of neotropical birds in the British Museum. In 1933 he spent many weeks abroad in these pursuits and he was able to return to Europe in 1938, when he attended the International Ornithological Congress at Rouen, France, as a permanent member of the committee on international ornithological congresses.

The trip in 1933 coupled with work at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Cambridge, Massachusetts, led to his contribution of 1934 entitled "Critical Notes on Middle American Birds" published in the

bulletin of that museum. This major paper dealt with many taxonomic issues relating to Guatemalan and other Central American birds and included a useful report on the Brewster Collection of Chihuahuan and Sonoran birds. The working up of the Brewster material was fundamental to the solution of problems in Sonora, although the paper dealt largely with the Frazar specimens which subsequently, as later understood by van Rossem, proved unreliable for color work because of some unfortunate method followed by the collector in preserving and preparing the skins. Van Rossem in his work at other museums than his own kept very careful records of types examined and he was generous in supplying details about them to other workers whose decisions hinged on type identifications.

An example of the hasty work alluded to earlier was the outgrowth of the European trip of 1938. A long series of descriptions of new races published in 1938 in the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* was not in keeping with Van's powers of discrimination and judgment displayed in his best publications. Whether these descriptions were done in haste because of limited time in England or under some heavy drive to describe new forms, which for the moment gripped him, the result generally was not a happy one.

In 1939 he again had opportunity to go to Europe through the award of a Guggenheim Fellowship. The trip was unfortunately shortened by the onset of war but he did get to Paris, Brussels, Leiden, and various cities in Germany, as well as to London.

Among the more distinguished and substantial contributions of the years when the Sonoran work was foremost were van Rossem's "Birds of the Charleston Mountains, Nevada" (1936) which was noteworthy for its zonal and ecological information, and "A Synopsis of the Savannah Sparrows of Northwestern Mexico" (1947). In the last years of his life he was pressing forward with a revisionary study of the Screech Owls of the Sonoran province pursued with the interest and collaboration of Loye Miller, the two men having spent much time in night hunting for critical material from 1944 on. This work was interrupted short of manuscript stage by van Rossem's death on September 4, 1949, but his efforts were not entirely lost in this matter as his assemblage of specimens and partial record of viewpoints were the basis for further study and report in 1951 (A. H. Miller and L. Miller) on this group of birds. Likewise unfinished was a revised treatment of the Birds of Baja California on which Van worked determinedly in checking literature and specimens in his last year between illnesses. The spark of interest in this job buoyed him up, and while hospitalized he spoke optimistically of its early completion, an event which only he could have seen through.

Van Rossem's sons of his first marriage, Donald Richard (Dick) and (Adriaan) Peter, as well as their mother and Van's mother survive him. Although they never participated in Van's scientific studies, they were rightly proud of his professional attainments. In 1934 Van married Florence S. Stevenson and in 1944, following her death, Dorothy Sanderson. Dorothy Sanderson had been interested in the Dickey enterprises and had worked for Donald Dickey in the 1920's. Her death in 1946 was another tragic personal chapter in Van's life, for there was a strong community of interest in natural history between them, even though poor health prohibited Dorothy Sanderson's participating in field work.

Honors came to van Rossem as his mastery of subject and his abundant publications made him widely known in ornithological circles. Beside the Brewster Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and other recognitions earlier noted, he was elected a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1934 and a member of the Council in 1946. In 1944 he served as President of the Southern Division of the Cooper Ornithological Club and continued thereafter on the Board of Governors of this Society, serving likewise a term on its Board of Directors concerned with business of the Corporation. In 1937 he was elected a corresponding member of the Sociedad de Biología of México.

Thus appropriately recognized was a career of unswerving devotion to ornithology that overrode many difficult periods of family loss and professional uncertainty. In the later years in spite of experiences that doubtless afforded basis for bitterness, there was notable in Van an increasing attitude of kindness and helpfulness toward colleagues and graduate students at the University of California at Los Angeles, as indeed toward those less immediately associated. These were a reflection of character which, combined with his drive, enthusiasm, and achievement, inscribe the monument to this colorful man.

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley, California, August 15, 1956.