

IN MEMORIAM: JOHN TODD ZIMMER

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY AND DEAN AMADON

John Todd Zimmer, a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, was born at Bridgeport, Ohio, on February 28, 1889, and died at White Plains, New York, shortly before his 68th birthday, on January 6, 1957. His youth and early career as a naturalist were chiefly associated with Nebraska. He graduated from the State University at Lincoln in 1910 and received the Master's degree in the following year. At the height of his career, in 1943, his *Alma Mater* conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

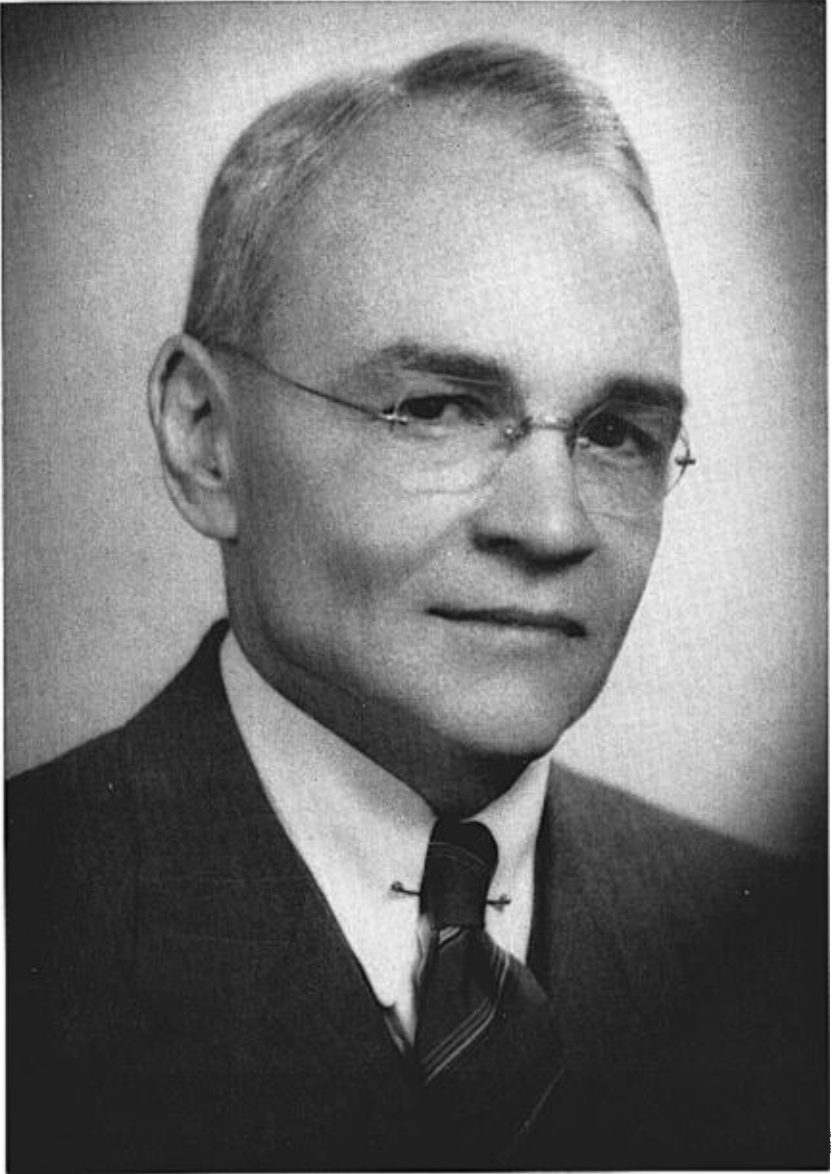
Although his first scientific specialization was in entomology, he had an early interest in ornithology as well. During his college years he made an excellent collection of Nebraska birds. This always remained in his possession and was bequeathed to the University of Nebraska as a result of a wish expressed shortly before the end of his life.

After college, Zimmer spent two years as Field Entomologist with the Nebraska Experiment Station and concurrently served as collaborator with the United States Department of Agriculture. The circumstances of his next move do not seem to be recorded, but in 1913 he went to the Philippine Islands as Assistant Superintendent of Pest Control for the Bureau of Agriculture. Four years later he transferred to Port Moresby, New Guinea, as an expert for the Papuan Department of Agriculture.

In July 1917 Zimmer married Miss Margaret Thompson, who resided with him for several years in New Guinea, where at least one of their two children was born. Their son, Lawrence Thompson Zimmer, became a bio-physicist. The daughter, Ida Elizabeth Zimmer Sprague, majored in philosophy in her college career and is also the mother of three children.

Zimmer and his wife were a notably close and congenial couple. He never fully recovered from the shock and sorrow of her death in October 1945. It is strange that the same malady in the same locus—first diagnosed as "arthritis" of the hip—carried off wife and husband twelve years apart.

Information about Zimmer's official services in the Philippines and New Guinea is surprisingly scant, but his continuing or growing interest in birds is shown by the fact that he made important personal collections in both places. On Philippine birds he published two still valuable papers. His New Guinea specimens were never the subject of a similar report by him, but they were purchased by the American



JOHN TODD ZIMMER
1889-1957

Museum of Natural History, along with the Philippine collection, in time to be studied by Ernst Mayr while the latter was preparing his "List of New Guinea Birds."

Following the return from Papua to the United States, Zimmer spent a short period as assistant at the University of Nebraska Museum before he was called to join the staff of the Field Museum (now the Chicago Natural History Museum). Two of his eight years in Chicago were devoted to preparing the "Catalogue of the Ayer Ornithological Library," which was published in two volumes. This extremely useful work of reference is an example of the meticulous attention to scholarship and the book-lover's art with which Zimmer approached all research, whether bibliographic, nomenclatural, or taxonomic. While at Chicago he also took part in the Conover-Everard African Expedition and later in the Marshall Field Peruvian Expedition. His extensive report on the birds of the Peruvian expedition marked the beginning of his ultimate exhaustive study of the unrivaled avifauna of the South American continent.

Charles Hellmayr had been brought from Europe to Chicago to complete the "Catalogue of the Birds of the Americas," which had been initiated at the Field Museum by Charles B. Cory. In New York, Frank M. Chapman was looking for a properly qualified ornithologist to augment research on the vast neotropical collections possessed by the American Museum of Natural History, the definitive study of which had already been marked by Chapman's own monographs on the birds of Colombia and Ecuador. It was thus natural that he should turn to Zimmer, who had just passed forty years of age, and who in 1930 came to New York as Associate Curator of Birds. In 1935 he became Executive Curator, in 1942 Curator, and in 1954 Chairman, after the retirement of Robert Cushman Murphy from that post. Unfortunately, a decline in his health had set in before the final appointment, but he continued with unflinching and uncompromising fortitude to come to the Museum as long as it was humanly possible. Later he carried on his work from his desk at home, and finally from a wheelchair.

To turn back twelve years, the sudden death of Glover M. Allen in 1942 left *The Auk* without an editor. James P. Chapin, then President of the American Ornithologists' Union, proposed his colleague John Zimmer for the post. Zimmer accepted and served for six years as the fourth editor of the journal, for which his broad knowledge of ornithological science, his familiarity with the historic literature gained during the compilation of the Ayer Catalogue, and his trained capacity for editorial work well fitted him.

Throughout twenty-seven years of service at the American Museum of Natural History, Zimmer applied himself primarily to the study of Peruvian birds. He published a series of systematic revisions of the avifauna of that country, and incidentally of many other parts of the American tropics. In connection with these studies he carefully examined allied populations from outside Peru, with the result that the papers of this series contain many revisions of wide-ranging polytypic species, invaluable to workers anywhere in the neotropics. His methodical listing of the localities of all specimens examined often recorded for the first time occurrences in areas far distant from Peru. At the time of his death no fewer than 66 of these publications had appeared. This is the accomplishment that brought him the award of the Brewster Medal in 1952, at which date the accompanying ascription noted that his papers "have embodied extremely thorough and sound taxonomic treatment of a large proportion of the genera of birds in South America. These reports are truly the foundation for the work of all other current students of the South American avifauna."

Zimmer formed a close working relationship with William H. Phelps, Sr. of Caracas, and twice visited that city to study the peerless Phelps Collection of Venezuelan birds. Many publications resulted from the collaboration of these two ornithologists. Zimmer also found a kindred spirit in the late James Lee Peters, and the two men were alike in their uncompromising insistence upon thoroughly substantiated systematic work. It was a rare compliment when Peters asked Zimmer to write the volume on the difficult Family Tyrannidae for his "Check-List of Birds of the World." During Zimmer's last year or two of full activity it was his custom to devote alternate weeks to the American flycatchers and to Peruvian birds. Needless to say, both occupations were interrupted, as his work had been in earlier years, by frequent requests of other colleagues for assistance and by pressing matters of Museum exhibition and administration. In the tidiness of all his data he showed attributes of the ideal museum curator.

As a world-traveler and an individual of dedicated leanings since boyhood, as well as one whose interests and training had embraced entomology, botany, and the study of vertebrates other than the birds that ultimately claimed his major attention, Zimmer was a widely-informed naturalist. To a surprising degree he knew the answers to many questions that stumped his colleagues. It is regrettable that his whole-hearted attention to exemplary systematic work prevented him from publishing a larger proportion of his broad knowledge of animal behavior, geographical distribution, and ecological relationships.

An excellent example of his experimental approach to bird-watching is offered by his discovery of the refractive adaptation in the sight of herons. While feeding small fish to young purple herons, Zimmer noticed that the captive birds "struck short" and hit the ground on the near side of the dead prey. Surmising the reason, he next immersed the fish under two or three inches of water, whereupon the herons struck and seized the food at the first attempt. The significance of this is that any bird with its eye in the air and its quarry in the water would of necessity aim at a visual point where there was no fish in order to compensate for the different refractive index of each medium.

Temperamentally, John Zimmer was both shy and self-contained. In the delivery of a scientific paper at a meeting he spoke freely and articulately, but in the associations of daily life he talked only when something needed saying. This did not inhibit the drily humorous comments he was apt to interject into group conversations of his fellows at the lunch table or in the Museum coffee room. Once in a while he might reach into the past and tell us of some adventure, perhaps one pertaining to travel on a motorcycle in the back country of Luzon. Such experiences, of which we heard only rarely, seemed far removed from the regulated life of the reserved, conservative, daily commuter between White Plains and Manhattan. No doubt, however, they were in part the source of the breadth and maturity that characterized his later accomplishments in research and administration.

In general, Zimmer was certainly much more a listener than a talker. Furthermore, although always friendly in his willingness to devote any amount of thought in response to a call for aid, he was at the same time a man who had few inclinations that could be called "social." He was, nevertheless a valued and faithful member of the Explorers' Club of New York. Of his avocational interests, or those pertaining to his home community, we knew relatively little. He had a taste for gardening, about which he would sometimes converse with those in sympathy. This was reflected also in a tray of small desert plants that was for years a feature of his office. Sometimes he would mention to one of us the satisfaction he had derived from a brief visit with his children and grandchildren. But the general impression he created at the Museum, particularly after he had lost his wife, was of a man of semi-recluse traits whose aim in life was consistently centered on the huge task of deciphering and spreading on the record the relationships of birds in the continent that has produced more families and species than any other.

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

The list omits the following publications of Dr. Zimmer: entomological and mammalogical (one) items; some of his early notes on Nebraskan birds; many descriptions of South American birds, particularly those written in co-authorship with Dr. W. H. Phelps, Senior, and which are listed in the bibliography of "Aves de Venezuela" by Phelps and Phelps; and also all reviews.

- 1911 Some notes on the winter birds of Dawes County. *Proc. Nebraska Ornith. Union*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 19-30, March 1.
Some results of four years' observation and collecting chiefly in the vicinity of Lincoln. *Proc. Nebraska Ornith. Union*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 34-37, April 29.
- 1918 Instinctive feeding habits in young herons. *Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington*, vol. 31, p. 94.
A few rare birds from Luzon, Mindanao, and Mindoro. *Philippine Journ. Sci.*, vol. 13, no. 5, sec. D, pp. 223-232, September.
Some notes on the birds of southern Palawan and adjacent islands. *Philippine Journ. Sci.*, vol. 13, no. 6, sec. D, pp. 327-357, November.
- 1924 New birds from central Peru. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, vol. 12, no. 4 (publ. no. 218), pp. 51-67, April.
- 1926 Catalogue of the Edward E. Ayer Ornithological Library. Parts I and II. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, vol. XVI (publ. nos. 239 and 240), pp. 1-706, 10 pls., November.
- 1927 Fauna [of Papua]. In Smith, Staniforth, "Handbook of the Territory of Papua," 4th ed.: 31-36.
- 1929 Variation and distribution of two species of *Diglossa*. *Auk*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 21-37, figs. 1-2, January.
The birds of the neotropical genus *Deconychura*. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, vol. 17, no. 1 (publ. no. 257), pp. 3-18, May.
A study of the Tooth-billed Red Tanager, *Piranga flava*. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, vol. 17, no. 5 (publ. no. 269), pp. 169-219, pl. 1, December.
- 1930 Birds of the Marshall Field Peruvian Expedition, 1922-1923. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, vol. XVII, no. 7, pp. 233-480, December.
- 1931-1955 Studies of Peruvian Birds. I-LXVI. *Amer. Mus. Novit.* The first, no. 500, pp. 1-23, October, 1931; the final study, no. 1723, pp. 1-35, April, 1955.
- 1931 Stone, W., J. T. Zimmer, *et al.* Check-list of North American Birds. 4th ed., 526 pp.
- 1932 The Central American forms of the Musician Wren, *Cyphorhinus lawrencii* Lawrence. *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, no. 573, pp. 1-4, October.
- 1938 A new genus and species of Mexican flycatcher. *Auk*, vol. 55, pp. 663-665, fig. 1, October.
Notes on migrations of South American birds. *Auk*, vol. 55, pp. 405-410, July.
- 1943 A new species of finch from Ecuador. *Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington*, vol. 56, pp. 33-34, February.
Zimmer, J. T., and E. Mayr. New species of birds described from 1938 to 1941. *Auk*, vol. 60, pp. 249-262, April.

- 1944 In Memoriam—Carl Eduard Hellmayr. *Auk*, vol. 61, pp. 616–622, pl. 28, October.
Zimmer, J. T., and W. H. Phelps. New species and subspecies of birds from Venezuela. *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, no. 1270, pp. 1–16, fig. 1, December.
The first of several papers of this nature.
- 1945 A Chimney Swift from Colombia. *Auk*, vol. 62, p. 145, January.
A new swift from Central and South America. *Auk*, vol. 62, pp. 586–592, October.
- 1945 Hammond's Flycatcher in Nebraska. *Nebraska Bird Rev.*, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 41, May.
- 1946 Frank Michler Chapman. *Amer. Nat.*, vol. 80, no. 793, pp. 476–481, 1 fig. July–August.
- 1947 Yellow-billed Loon on Long Island, New York. *Auk*, vol. 64, pp. 145–146.
- 1948 The specific name of the Olive Warbler. *Auk*, vol. 65, pp. 126–127, January.
More about Ridgway's *Color Standards and Color Nomenclature*. *Science* vol. 108, no. 2805, p. 356, October.
- 1952 Zimmer, J. T., and J. Delacour. The identity of *Anser nigricans* Lawrence. *Auk*, vol. 69, pp. 82–84, January.
A new finch from northern Peru. *Jour. Wash. Acad. Sci.*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 103–104, March.
Zimmer, J. T., *et al.* Proposed use of the plenary powers to put an end to the confusion arising from the discordant use of the generic name "Colymbus" Linnaeus, 1758 (Class Aves). *Bull. Zool. Nomencl.* 9 (1/3), pp. 6–7, October.
Zimmer, J. T., *et al.* Proposed use of the plenary powers to suppress the trivial name "Caspicus" Hablizl, 1783. *Bull. Zool. Nomencl.* 9 (1/3), pp. 30–31, October.
- 1953 Notes on Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae). *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, no. 1605, pp. 1–16, January.
- 1954 Zimmer, J. T., and W. H. Phelps. A new flycatcher from Venezuela, with remarks on the Mocquerys collection and the Piculet, *Picumnus squamulatus*. *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, no. 1657, pp. 1–7, May.
- 1955 In Memoriam: Elsie Margaret Binger Naumburg. *Auk*, vol. 72, pp. 265–266, July.
Further notes on Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae). *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, no. 1749, pp. 1–24, November.
- 1957 Wetmore, A., J. T. Zimmer, *et al.* Check-list of North American Birds. 5th ed., 691 pp.
- In Press: The families Tyrannidae, Pipridae, Cotingidae and Phytotomidae in Peters' "Check-list of Birds of the World."