

SPECIAL REVIEW

MR. TODD AND THE BIRDS OF LABRADOR

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Birds of the Labrador Peninsula and adjacent areas A distributional list.—W. E. Clyde Todd. 1963. Published in association with Carnegie Museum by University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Ontario; 819 pages, 9 col. pls., numerous photographs, maps. \$18.00.—This mammoth volume sets a landmark in bird books as just about the last word in geographical studies. I doubt that another like it will ever be published. The interests of the younger generation of ornithologists have turned to behavior, life history, ecology, and the like, and no one any longer is doing this sort of fine, careful, detailed, comprehensive work on distribution and systematics.

The book also probably sets a record among major bird works by a single author for time in production. It has been "in the works" since 1901 when the author made his first trip down the northeast coast of Labrador, followed over the next 57 years by 24 more expeditions to different parts of the peninsula. And let it be remembered by today's young softies that he made all but the very last of those trips the hard way, before railroads opened up much of the country and aircraft made all the northern interior so easy of access. Though you'll find little mention of them in the text, he knows well the rigors of canoe travel, the strain of the tump line on the long portage, the miseries of fly country in fly time without modern repellents—also the unique pleasures and satisfaction to be achieved only by traversing the northern forest and tundra country by trail and stream.

For some abstruse and never acknowledged reason Todd decided early in his work to complete his survey of the entire peninsula before publishing his findings. In his studies over more than a half century he wrote on the region prior to this great tome exactly 17 minor papers. Some are popular general accounts of his travels written for the magazine of the Carnegie Museum which supported them; others straighten out systematic tangles or describe new forms it was wiser to get into print at once—and the types in the Carnegie collections.

The author's modest admission that the appearance of this work "has been unduly delayed" (p. 13) is perhaps one of the understatements of the decade. Yet I take exception to his claim (Preface) that "All the consecutive field work requisite for the writing of this book might have been completed thirty years ago, and the volume could and should have been brought out then." That would have been before his last 11 expeditions, and I don't believe the work started to gel in his mind until he finally started writing it some 10 years ago. This is most definitely not the sort of book one sits down and produces in a year or two. It took time first to prepare for, and time to think out, then to compose, and finally to put into print—time which, despite some avoidable delays, the results amply justify the spending of.

To me the book is trebly welcome, first of all for its merit as a splendid contribution to knowledge. Second, I am thankful it came off the presses after all these years while the author can still enjoy the well-earned plaudits it must bring him. Thirdly, I am delighted to see at last what I personally have been anticipating and awaiting for almost 40 years, ever since I first sailed down the Labrador in 1926 and learned that an ornithologist, known from one end of the

coast to the other as "the egg-shaped professor," had preceded me there six years previously, accompanied by a pleasant, active "young feller who liked to draw birds—name of Sutton" they said. Did I know them? No, not personally then, and it was some years before I did. Perhaps the story will bear telling.

After three summers of collecting along the coast I decided I had enough material to work up for my thesis at Harvard. I wanted to make my dissertation as comprehensive as possible, and I was a bit concerned about the material Todd must have collected and not as yet reported on. I did not relish the thought of usurping any of the rights and privileges of a famous ornithologist almost 30 years my senior, who had started work on the Labrador before I was born, and I hoped fervently he would publish soon so I could incorporate his records and results with my own.

I was finally able to seek him out and ask him about his Labrador material at my first A.O.U. meeting at Philadelphia in 1929. I ruefully recall that Mr. Todd was neither overly cordial nor congenial to this brash young upstart. To my nervous, awkward queries he replied briefly that yes, he had quite a bit of material from Newfoundland Labrador, and he'd get around to publishing on it "when he was ready."

I returned to Cambridge chastened and downhearted, and I moped about the MCZ bird rooms in frustrated indecision, accomplishing nothing, until one afternoon dear old Outram Bangs asked what on earth was wrong with me. When I told him he laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Oliver. Work up your own stuff and forget about Clyde's. If he publishes before you finish, fine. If he doesn't, don't you wait for him. You might have a long wait." Though I didn't appreciate it then, what a prophet Outram Bangs was! Anyhow I cheered up, went to work again, finished my thesis, got my degree in 1931, and saw my *Birds of Newfoundland Labrador* published in 1932.

It was some years later at the Madison, Wisconsin, A.O.U. meetings in 1954 that Mr. Todd asked me to meet him for breakfast as he wanted to show me something. He appeared at the cafeteria with a bulging briefcase from which, when we were settled over our meal, he brought out a thick manuscript. This proved to be the typescript of the systematic accounts, up through the waterfowl, of *Birds of the Labrador Peninsula*. I told him how happy I was to see it materializing at last, but he looked at me sadly. "Oliver, I have not only seen almost everything ever written on the birds of Labrador, I have examined practically all the birds that were ever collected there, including yours. But you know Francis Harper went into Ungava from the north shore of the Gulf last year? What he collected I don't know. He won't let me see his birds, and he won't tell me when or even if he's going to publish on them. I can't publish until he does, for my work won't be complete if I do. So I've had to stop writing."

I reminded him that he had once put me in the same predicament, so I knew exactly how he felt, and I repeated to him what Outram Bangs had advised me a quarter century before. He also found the advice sound, for he notes (p. 779) "the systematic part of the present paper had been virtually completed in manuscript" when Harper's account came out in 1958—and posed no problem other than the incorporating of a few new locality records, hardly worth fussing about.

The finished product, 63 years in the making, proves to be one of the solidest and most complete treatises ever done on the birds of a major and well defined region. The book's backbone is the detailed accounts of the systematics, dis-

tribution, and status of the 338 species and subspecies so far reported from the Labrador Peninsula and adjoining northern Ontario and western Quebec. Introductory chapters sketch the geography, physiography, geology, climate, and ecology sufficiently for the necessary background. A chapter summarizing the ornithological work in the region to 1960 is followed by highly readable narratives of the 25 Carnegie expeditions. Their routes are traced on a fold-in map, accompanied by a most useful gazeteer of place names occupying 30 double-column pages. The exhaustive bibliography of 50-odd pages lists 918 titles with pertinent comments and annotations. In summarizing his data Todd classifies the Labrador birds by seasonal occurrence and by life zones. I particularly enjoyed his reconstruction (pp. 65-66) of the geographic history of the Labrador avifauna, which amends and carries to more logical conclusions some of my own early theorizing.

The one aspect of the work open to controversy is its systematics, which are often at variance with those generally accepted today. In the main they are highly conservative, and the author maintains a nice balance between the splitting and lumping schools. Somehow his resurrection of long-sunk genera—*Dafila*, *Nettion*, *Querquedula*, *Hydrocoloeus* for instance—and his maintenance of specific distinctiveness for the Nearctic representatives of most circumpolar forms—*Oidemia americana*, *Accipiter atricapillus*, *Circus hudsonicus*, *Capella delicata*, and *Anthus rubescens* among others—do not seem nearly so antiquated as they would have 15 years ago. Perhaps the pendulum is swinging back again.

Todd is meticulous in expounding his reasoning wherever his taxonomy differs from current usage, and he does so with refreshing clarity, simplicity, and succinctness, often tinged with his wry humor. His staunch defense of his concepts is a salutary reminder that far advanced though avian taxonomy may be over that of any other class, much remains to be learned before unanimity of opinion is achieved. And by analogy it intimates that no check-lists are sacrosanct, and their factual soundness is often in inverse ratio to the number of persons involved in producing them.

He carries his nomenclatural freethinking into the common names he uses as well. His retention of vernaculars for subspecies is perhaps understandable in view of the number he has described. In omitting the possessives from common names (as *The Condor* has done since 1902 following Merriam's 1899 lead) I fear he is backing a lost cause. Despite the rationality of it, and the precedences for it set by the Board on Geographic Names and others, people somehow just won't say Leach Petrel, Steller Eider, Ross Goose, and Cooper Hawk, any more than they will titmouses. Even Todd writes titmice, which he certainly knows is etymologically incorrect. We resist changes in established vernacular names so strongly we have no need for a *nomina conservanda* provision. Thus Todd's proposed Wood Wren for Winter Wren and Greenland Gull for Iceland Gull, happy and suitable changes though they be, are not likely to take.

The publishers have accorded the work the generous treatment it merits. It is nicely printed and bound, and adequately if not exhaustively proofed—I noted fewer typos than might be expected in so extensive and technical a work. They have also dressed it up with 24 pages of black and white photographs of the country and its birds, and 9 excellent color plates, 8 of them most fittingly by that aforementioned "feller who liked to draw birds" back in 1920. Many critics consider George Sutton's superb handling of nestlings and juvenals represents him at his best, but my favorites here are the dramatic White Gyrfalcon

frontispiece and the Black Guillemot on an ice pan, both of which carry me back to long ago and far away.

Finally to this critic, who has had his fill of coping with the ouputput of writers (for want of a better term) to whom English syntax is a mere formality not to be taken too seriously, Todd's writing style is a real treat. It is no mean feat to maintain reader interest through 800 big pages. Those pages do him proud.