



LUDLOW GRISCOM
1890-1959

Photograph made in 1950 by Edwin Way Teale
(Courtesy National Audubon Society)

IN MEMORIAM: LUDLOW GRISCOM

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THOSE of us who might be called senior ornithologists recognize that Ludlow Griscom symbolized an era, the rise of the competent bird-watcher. It was he, perhaps more than anyone else, who bridged the gap between the collector of the old school and the modern field ornithologist with the binocular. He demonstrated that practically all birds have their field marks and that it is seldom necessary for a trained man to shoot a bird to know, at the specific level, precisely what it is.

Like so many brilliant field birders, Ludlow Griscom was born and raised in New York City. He was born on June 17, 1890. His parents were Clement Acton and Genevieve Sprigg Griscom, who took him almost every summer on motoring trips through Europe. Growing up in an international atmosphere (his grandfather was a general, an uncle was an admiral, and another uncle an ambassador), he became a linguist at an early age. He was taught by private tutors until he was 11 and then attended the Symes School where at the age of 15 he passed the entrance examinations for Harvard. Being too young, he was kept at home for two more years where he devoted most of his time to music and languages. In fact, he became so skilled at the keyboard that he entertained the thought of becoming a concert pianist. However, his interest in birds, sparked at the age of 6, had by now gained ascendancy over the piano, much to the disapproval of his parents, who felt he was wasting his time.

At the age of 17 he enrolled at Columbia University where he took a pre-law course. Because of his family background and fabulous linguistic ability (he learned to speak 5 languages fluently, could read 10 easily, and could translate up to 18 with a little help), his parents insisted that he prepare for the foreign service, but he would have none of this. His mind was made up; he wanted to be an ornithologist.

Although he did not own his first pair of prism binoculars until he was 21, he was, by that time, an accomplished virtuoso—as adept in naming the birds as he was at the keyboard or in his command of languages.

Griscom's musical memory certainly gave him a highly critical ear for the subtleties of bird song. His ear also had the advantage of being unusually acute. In World War I, on military duty, he became an exhibition piece when army doctors tested the sensitivity of his hearing.

After receiving his A.B. degree from Columbia in 1912 he turned his back upon law school and went instead to Cornell, becoming the first graduate student under Arthur A. Allen, America's first professor of

ornithology. It is said that he refused his father's generous check and worked his way through his graduate years. He taught ornithology during two summers at the University of West Virginia and received his M.S. from Cornell in 1915. He stayed for one more year at Cornell, teaching in the Biology Department, before returning to New York.

He had long since proved himself to his peers of the Linnaean Society of New York. Recalling those days of his youth he wrote: "When a veteran ornithologist of an older generation wished to add birds to his collection, he drove out on a lovely May day from New York City to Van Courtlandt Park and was perfectly free to shoot as many warblers in the morning as he could skin in the afternoon. When visiting a friend in New Haven, in whose shade trees a pair of warbling vireos were nesting, by first ringing the doorbell, hat in hand, and courteously requesting permission, it was entirely possible to blaze away and shoot the warbling vireo out of the treetop onto the lawn in the City of New Haven on a spring Sunday morning."

But Ludlow, self trained as a boy in Central Park, was of a new breed. He had once been challenged by one of the old fellows of the Linnaean to prove how good he was with his little four power French opera glasses. Ludlow pointed to a warbler flitting in the top branches of a sycamore and pronounced it to be a female Cape May. The old boy, who made all his own identifications through the sights of his shotgun, blazed away. Down came the bird—and it *was* a female Cape May. After repeating this performance several times the reputation of the boy genius was made.

Determined to work at the American Museum of Natural History, he first started in the department of fishes until a spot opened up in the bird department. During the 10 years that followed (1917–1927), first as an assistant and later as assistant curator of ornithology, he received invaluable training under Frank M. Chapman. World War I disrupted things and as a second lieutenant Ludlow was involved in intelligence, sending propaganda leaflets across the German lines in balloons.

It was during his American Museum years that I first met him—at the time of the 1925 A.O.U. meeting in New York. This dark-haired young man of 35 sponsored my application for associate membership in the A.O.U., and later, on a field trip to Long Beach, at that time still an unspoiled barrier island, he showed me 13 life birds.

In 1927, shortly before he left the American Museum, he was elected President of the Linnaean Society of New York. For a decade his influence had dominated the bi-monthly Tuesday night meetings of that sophisticated club. His most devoted protegés were a small group of young men known as the B C B C (Bronx County Bird Club). Joseph

Hickey and Allan Cruickshank were charter members of this exclusive group (I was later admitted as its first non-Bronx member). Ludlow was always a good show at Linnaean meetings, but a bit austere in keeping us in line when we dared report anything as unlikely as a Hoary Redpoll or a Sabine's Gull. We were cross-examined ruthlessly (a few years later we were to give similar grillings to the next wave of youngsters). Ludlow was our God and his *Birds of the New York City region* published in 1923 became our Bible. We could recite chapter and verse and even adopted his inflections when we pronounced a bird to be "unprecedented" or a "common summer resident." John Kuerzi, the leader of our group, even adopted the Griscom hair-do, parting his own hair in the center.

The Bronx boys, applying the "Griscom method" to the Christmas Census (now called the Audubon Christmas Count), were the first to develop the high-pressure methods that are now used widely throughout the country. They were the first to break through the "sound barrier" of 100 species on a Christmas list, a commonplace feat along our coasts today. This was a game, admittedly, but a useful game, a test of skills and part of the basic training of any competent ornithologist.

Griscom, we must acknowledge, was the high priest of this new cult of split-second field identification. My own field guides, though a visual invention, were profoundly influenced by his teaching.

His influence spread like the ripples on a pond. When he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1927 at the invitation of Thomas Barbour he created a second center of influence and Massachusetts ornithology has never been the same since. Today, wherever one goes in all parts of our country one finds that the sharpest local field observers were trained either by Griscom, his protégés, or his protégés' protégés; or they can be traced indirectly to his influence through some eastern club in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or Washington where his influence was felt most strongly.

At the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge he filled the post of assistant curator of ornithology until 1948 when he became research ornithologist and editor.

Most professional ornithologists would probably categorize Ludlow Griscom first as a systematist, whose particular sphere was Mexico and Central America. During his American Museum years he took part in expeditions to Nicaragua in 1917, Panama in 1924, Yucatan in 1926, and Panama again in 1927. In 1930, after his transfer to Harvard, he led an expedition to Guatemala. Knowing the bird in the hand certainly contributed to his legendary ability in the field. But recognition of birds in the field requires a different technique and often a different

set of characters than does identification of specimen material. Once, as a young man in the Guaymis Indian country of western Panama, where no ornithologist had ever preceded him, he collected nine birds new to science. Nine times, before he pulled the trigger he knew he was getting a bird not to be found in the trays of any museum in the world.

Few of Ludlow's birding companions knew of his equally hard-driving botanical activities, for he seldom stopped to examine a flower if he was birding. Yet, if questioned about a plant, it seemed that no matter how obscure it was, he would name it and glibly recite the vital statistics without missing a warbler. He once told me that he had personally found and collected 95 per cent of all the species included in Gray's manual of botany. Forty thousand of his sheets were deposited in the Gray Herbarium at Harvard, in his own collection and elsewhere. In fact, Professor M. L. Fernald, the author of the new Gray's manual, 8th edition, published in 1950, often used Ludlow as a "guinea pig" to see whether his intricate generic keys would work.

The two men often went on collecting trips and it was Griscom who urged Fernald to concentrate on the corners of the Gray area—southeastern Virginia and Newfoundland—so as to add the greatest number of new forms. Like his field birding, his botanizing was a competitive game to make or break a record, to extend the known range of a species.

He both discovered new plants and named them, just as in the American tropics he had discovered and named new birds. A friend who accompanied him to Labrador on one trip described him, at the end of a day, as looking like a man just back from hell, draped with plant presses and his face grossly swollen from the bites of mosquitos and black-flies. He scorned head nets and other protective devices, insisting they hampered his efficiency.

It was on a botanical trip to Newfoundland in 1925 that he met his future wife, who was then Edith Sumner Sloan, a trained nurse stationed at one of the Grenfell missions near the Straight of Belle Isle. They were married on September 14, 1926, and their union was blessed with three children, Edith, Andrew, and Joan. Family life was divided between two homes, a large house on Fayerweather Street in Cambridge during the academic year and a smaller house overlooking the marsh at Chatham on the elbow of Cape Cod during the summer and early autumn, the season of shorebirds.

Ludlow Griscom had a very keen sense of humor, sometimes warm and affectionate, and always spiced with his special figures of speech. But as often as not his banter was of a gruffer sort, which one of his associates defined as "the retort discourteous." This caught some sensitive souls

off balance and even made a few enemies. He often played for the galleries and got on best with those who could give as well as take.

To quote Edwin Way Teale: "His mental reactions were all fast—fast in conversation, fast in driving his car, fast in identification. He always seemed poised on the balls of his feet, never standing flat-footed. He impressed you as the kind of man who would succeed at whatever he set his mind to. And fortunately for ornithology he set his mind to the study of birds."

A day in the field with the master was always punctuated with his characteristic phrases and pronouncements which became clichés to the clan: "Let's stop here and flap our ears . . . Check me on that one . . . Well, we bumped that one off . . . That's just a weed bird . . . Now someone find a bird with some zip in it . . . Just dribs and drabs left . . . What's the tide schedule? . . . First record for Massachusetts! . . . Unprecedented! . . . Please lower your voice to a howl . . . I don't like the look of that bird . . . Put it down to sheer ignorance, incompetence and inexperience . . . We got skunked on that one . . . That's a 10¢ bird . . . Well, we didn't do so badly . . . Having a good time?"

For many of us, these phrases and a hundred other Griscomisms bring to mind some of the richest hours of our lives, hours that usually started before dawn at the cafeteria on Harvard Square and often ended at Newburyport, Cape Ann, or Cape Cod.

Some in the profession were critical of Ludlow for not encouraging his many young satellites to embark on careers in ornithology. Indeed, he once told me that he had known only one young man whom he would have advised unequivocally to go into ornithology as a profession. And that young man, John Kuerzi, of the old Bronx County Bird Club, never did. In my own callow youth, when I told him of my desire to be a bird painter he said: "Well, only one man has ever made the grade—Louis Fuertes." And, as an afterthought, he added—"and perhaps Allan Brooks . . . I would not advise it as a profession." Years later when I challenged him about this pronouncement he replied (much as one of my old art teachers at the National Academy once commented): "A young person need not be *encouraged*. If he really has the drive, the guts, the talent, nothing can *discourage* him."

Like so many other men of action Ludlow never spared himself. He belonged to many clubs, including the Union, Harvard, and Faculty Clubs in Boston, the Union and Century in New York, and the Cosmos in Washington. He was chairman of the board and Honorary President of the National Audubon Society, a director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, a member of the Massachusetts Fish and Game Commission, and a Fellow of the A.O.U.; further, he was active in many other orga-

nizations. But apparently, when he became President of the Boston Society of Natural History, at the difficult time of its transition to the Museum of Science, the load of responsibility proved too much for him. In 1949, before he reached his 60th year he had his first stroke (a later citation from the Museum stated that he had "almost given his life" for that institution). He was to survive 10 more years.

One noticeable effect his decade of infirmity had on his personality was to make him seem warmer, more patient, less gruff. As a younger man he had often made it abundantly clear that he did not "suffer fools gladly," and only those who knew him well realized that this was merely a cover-up for a personality both affectionate and kind.

In the spring of 1956 Ludlow and Edith Griscom went to Mexico where because of the 7000-foot altitude he suffered a second serious stroke. It was later in the year that the A.O.U. elected him President. Profoundly moved by the honor (one that should have come to him earlier) he accepted and then immediately resigned, realizing that he was too ill to serve.

His physical troubles failed to crush his spirit and despite the warnings of doctors and friends he went into the field whenever he could find someone to drive him, even employing a chauffeur and a trained nurse when a friend was not available.

Early in 1958, crippled and virtually confined to a wheel chair, he amazed his friends by taking off for Africa with Edith. Nothing, it seemed, could hold him down. Travelling by boat and by car from Cape Town to Dakar and Rabat he added 300 birds to his life list. Later he added another 100 in Europe, bringing his total close to 3,000. He was elated. In a letter written in June he wrote that "thanks to the African trip and my improved health, I was able to hold a pair of glasses in both hands, so I really had a lovely time in May with the small warblers which I could see this year as well as hear sing. I was allowed only one big day trip in Essex County and we had only 131 for the day."

He was to see only one more spring migration. On May 28, 1959, just after the last of the Blackpolls and the other late warblers had passed through his garden in Cambridge, Ludlow Griscom died. He was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery where he had spent hundreds of May mornings monitoring the warbler flights of the previous 30 years. He had corrected the final proofs of his *Birds of Martha's Vineyard*, written in collaboration with Guy Emerson, his companion of many trips, but missed the pleasure of holding a bound copy by less than three weeks.

Unlike so many other academic men, he never lost his interest in local faunistics. To the very last days of his life he was as keen about the spring migration as he was as a boy. And for this reason, no other

ornithologist could speak with more authority about trends and shifts of populations. He had the facts, based on more than 50 years of matchless observation and a total of perhaps 12,000 carefully documented field trips. And certainly more than most of his contemporaries he was able to interpret what he saw and to develop fundamental and provocative ideas. Indeed, no ornithologist in our time has been more lucid or shown more insight in analyzing population trends and movements than Ludlow Griscom.

In his later years he often apologized for his addiction to bird-listing and insisted that it was really a relatively unimportant aspect of ornithology. He needed not to apologize for certainly one who had contributed as much as he to faunistics, systematics, migration study, and conservation was entitled to some pure sport.

He may have underestimated the value of his weekend bird-watching and it may well be that the long history of ornithology will record that perhaps his most significant contribution was that he elevated field recognition to a science and thereby telescoped the number of years that the serious bird student needed to master this part of his basic training.

MAJOR WORKS BY LUDLOW GRISCOM

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Old Lyme, Connecticut.