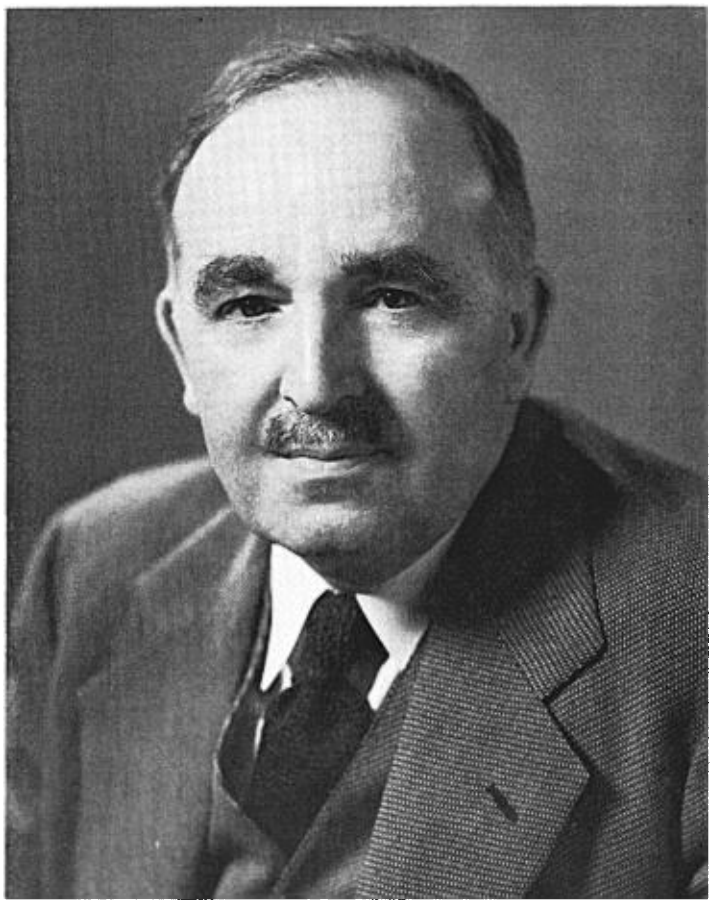

Arthur Augustus Allen, 1885–1964

IN MEMORIAM: ARTHUR A. ALLEN

OLIN SEWALL PETTINGILL, JR.

ARTHUR Augustus Allen died suddenly at his home in Ithaca, New York, on January 17, 1964. The report of his death, so unexpected, jolted us deeply and stirred memories.

Through the 1920's to the early 1940's the almost certain route to becoming a professional ornithologist in the United States was to enter the graduate school at Cornell University and obtain a Ph.D. degree under Arthur A. Allen. Cornell was the only American institution in those years to offer a program leading to a doctorate in ornithology *per se*. Determined to be an ornithologist, I set upon the certain route and entered the Cornell scene in the fall of 1930.

By this time Dr. Allen had helped found the Eastern Bird-Banding Association and served as its first president from 1923 to 1925. For his research on the diseases of the Ruffed Grouse, he had won the Outdoor Life Medal in 1924 and he had just completed with eminent success ten years of experiments in the difficult task of raising Ruffed Grouse in captivity. And in "the outside world" several of his former students, including Ludlow Griscom (the first of his graduate students), Francis Harper, Herbert Friedmann, Claude W. Leister, and Harrison F. Lewis were filling positions with distinction.

Arthur Allen had already proved himself a great teacher—imaginative, outgoing, inspirational. Undergraduates were flocking to his spring course as were teachers and youth leaders to his course in the summer school. Just to study birds with Allen was a vital experience. To aid his students in ornithology he had pioneered a unique *Laboratory Notebook* (Ithaca, New York, Comstock Publishing Company) in 1927 and this he complemented in 1930 with *The Book of Bird Life,* an elementary text. The notebook would appear eventually in four subsequent editions, the last in 1947; the text would be reprinted 11 times, then be revised in 1961.

Almost coincidental to teaching ornithology was his initiation of a course in the conservation of wildlife, the first of its kind offered by any university in the United States. Through his continuing interest in the Ruffed Grouse and concern with game management problems it was only natural that he would participate in the founding of The Wildlife Society in 1936. From 1938 to 1939 he served as its second president.

Allen's stature in ornithology developed slowly but firmly. After his youthful years at Buffalo, New York, where he was born December 28, 1885, he entered Cornell in 1904, received his A.B. degree in 1907 and his Master's degree in 1908. Straightway he undertook a doctoral program and obtained his Ph.D. degree three years later.

Doctoral theses by the score have since been written about birds, accepted, and too often filed away unpublished in university libraries, forgotten. But not Arthur Allen's. Published in 1914 under the title "The Red-winged Blackbird: A Study in the Ecology of a Cattail Marsh," it won instant acclaim. Witmer Stone in *The Auk* (31: 414–415, 1914) considered it "one of the best ecologic studies that has yet appeared . . . well worthy of the careful perusal of every ornithologist." And Frank M. Chapman in *Bird-Lore* (16: 284–285, 1914) praised its original content and method and its broad approach to ornithology, finally declaring it "the best, most significant biography which has thus far been prepared of any American bird." Essentially Allen's dissertation set a pattern for future studies of birds based on penetrating observations of their environmental relationships and life histories.

Already, prior to the publication of his thesis, the young Allen had won the attention and admiration of Chapman, then chairman of the Department of Birds in the prestigious American Museum of Natural History. No sooner did Allen complete his graduate work at Cornell than Chapman arranged for him to lead a museum expedition to Colombia in August 1911. Invalided by malarial fever, he was obliged to leave the expedition in April 1912, but not before viewing that richest of all bird faunas, the neotropical. He returned to Cornell in the fall as instructor in zoology, never again to be dissociated with the academic life of that university. He was promoted to assistant professor of ornithology in 1916 and in 1926 received a full professorship.

In 1913 Allen married Elsa Guerdrum. During their early years together much of her life centered in the home and the care of their five children. Later she assisted her husband in the summer courses, obtained her Ph.D. degree from Cornell in 1929, and developed a special interest in the history of ornithology. Frequently she accompanied him to scientific meetings and, in later years, on his field expeditions and lecture tours.

By 1930 Allen's teaching program at Cornell was flourishing and its reputation was widening yearly. Chapman, still one of Allen's staunchest admirers, continued to steer prospective ornithologists to Cornell. The number of graduate students increased steadily. Allen himself was only 45 years old and approaching his prime. How fortunate was I that my three years of graduate work with him came in the period from 1930 to 1933!

The "Grad Lab" in those years was in old McGraw Hall—decrepit, creaky, and drafty—but its setting contradicted its youthful *esprit* and the activity which was practically round the clock. Austin Rand and George Sutton were finishing up their dissertations based upon their ex-

peditions to Madagascar and Southampton Island, respectively. George Saunders, Wilfred Welter, Victor Gould, Elizabeth Kingsbury, and I were deep in life history studies. John Emlen was beginning work on crow populations. Meanwhile in our midst a retired stockbroker, Albert Brand, with the help of Allen's assistant, Paul Kellogg, was experimenting with ways and means of recording bird voices.

Dr. Allen was as busy as the rest of us. If he was not meeting classes, writing, filming birds, filling speaking engagements, or working with Brand and Kellogg on sound recording, he was completing one of his most significant pieces of research—on his discovery of the sex rhythm in the Ruffed Grouse and other birds—which he would report on at the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1933. From early morning to late at night, seven days of every week, it was ornithology with him in one form or another. Monday evening seminars brought us all together regularly; none of us would think of missing one.

All of us in the Grad Lab greatly valued the benefits from working in close association: the mutual stimulation derived from common interests, the discussions, the sharing of concern with our respective problems, and the consequent attainment of new concepts that neither classes nor texts could provide. The end result was a sense of fraternity and a feeling of pride in accomplishment. Ornithology at Cornell was something special and we were helping to make it so.

Even more than these benefits, we cherished the qualities of the man who had made them possible. In his calm, unassuming, yet persuasive way, "Doc" (as he was affectionately known to most of us) Allen generated enthusiasm and encouragement. In a moment of despair, an intuitive inquiry or a few understanding words from him helped enormously. He was an unswerving optimist—I never knew him then, or in later years, not to see the brighter side of any situation no matter how dismal at the time. His personal warmth and humanity made him easily approachable. He was never too busy or too tired to give his undivided attention. One never felt from him the sting of criticism or the suspicion that in some obscure way one was not living up to expectations.

Inseparable from his prevailing optimism was his great sense of humor, his boundless capacity for the light touch. In a personal conversation, at a seminar, in class, or in practically any situation, he could not pass up an opportunity to arouse a smile or laugh. Puns he found irresistible, and the more outrageous the better. He liked to tell stories involving amusing experiences at his own expense and he thoroughly enjoyed writing limericks. Invariably his humor was gentle, without rancor, and never intended to embarrass anyone.

Students with him in the field found him completely "unflappable,"

never losing his temper or showing discouragement. If something went wrong his usual comment was that "we must remember not to do it that way again." Then, with his characteristically infectious chuckle, he would turn his attention immediately to remedying the situation.

No man was ever more dedicated to, or concentrated more on, his chosen field. Politics, literature, music, religion, and sports seldom distracted him for any length of time. He hunted waterfowl one or two times each fall and now and then took on his students at the Grad Lab with a few rounds of ping-pong, but mostly his time was devoted to some endeavor that involved birds.

His approach to ornithology was open-minded. No aspect of the subject was without interest or above further investigation. As a consequence he never prescribed lines of research for his graduate students, whom he accepted as mature indivduals capable of choosing their own. They could undertake faunal, life-history, taxonomic, population, or behavioral studies —any studies so long as the objectives were scholarly. His influence on students was profound but unobtrusive, stimulating but never demanding. He provided advice and criticism only when requested; he did not impose his own ideas on his students, and yet gave generously of them and of his knowledge when sought. All this encouraged the student to develop self-reliance and independence in thought and attitude and to determine his own aspect of ornithology for his career. Allen-trained ornithologists have since filled many different positions and shown great diversity in their contributions to the science.

Throughout the 1930's, despite the lingering effects of the Great Depression, ornithological activity at Cornell accelerated. More graduate students than ever were working under Allen, and the Grad Lab was moved to larger quarters on the top floor of Fernow Hall where there were facilities for keeping food and a kitchenette of sorts. To students in that dollar-scarce period these facilities were a great boon and, by drawing them closer together, served to intensify the sense of fraternity.

Always the students enjoyed the hospitality of Glenside, the Allen home. Mrs. Allen, as much as her husband, delighted in entertaining them at breakfasts after bird walks, at receptions following programs by visiting ornithologists, and on sundry other occasions.

Although Arthur Allen never insisted that his graduate students attend the annual meetings of the A.O.U., he stressed their importance so successfully that students were eager not only to attend but to present papers as well. If transportation to the meetings became a serious problem for some, as it often did, he crowded them into his own car and at least once—for a meeting halfway across the country—loaned them his car.

The "Cornell Dinner" at A.O.U. meetings was an event that Dr. and Mrs. Allen arranged at great effort and sometimes personal expense, corralling all his students, former and presently enrolled, and their wives. For the students currently working with him the dinners provided a much-appreciated chance to meet those Cornellians who had already achieved eminence in their careers.

Along with his teaching at Cornell, Allen took a growing interest in teaching ornithology to the public through articles in magazines, films, and appearances on the lecture platform. Moreover he came to feel that others who contemplated careers in ornithology should do their share in widening popular interest in birds, and he undertook to instruct his graduate students accordingly. He initiated a course in applied ornithology that included training in the techniques and uses of interpretive media such as photography. He encouraged his graduate students to write articles for immediate publication and to give illustrated talks before the local citizenry; and he arranged for many of his graduate students to lead the bird walks sponsored on early Saturday mornings in May by the Cayuga Bird Club.

To what extent Frank Chapman may have influenced Allen in popularizing ornithology no one can say. At the turn of this century it was Chapman, more than anyone else, who initiated and fostered the first great surge of popular interest in American ornithology. Through *Bird-Lore,* which he edited, and the Christmas Bird Counts which the magazine sponsored, and through his many books, Chapman showed the way to the recreational enjoyment of birds and gave a purpose to undertaking explorations, acquiring "lists," making detailed observations, and taking photographs.

Chapman's unprecedented success in exciting people about birds strongly appealed to Allen who, like any true teacher, was quickly responsive to any methods that would better stimulate interest. In due course with Chapman's encouragement Allen became a frequent contributor to *Bird-Lore,* beginning in 1912, and eventually editor of its School Department from 1919 to 1934. Through its pages he was soon teaching an ever widening audience and beginning to show his own flair for originality.

Allen had a keen insight into the life of birds as organisms and could quickly grasp the essence of their behavior. One of Europe's most distinguished ethologists once referred to him as "the greatest bird behaviorist in North America." He put this insight to use in his *Bird-Lore* series of bird "autobiographies," wherein he had different species relate their life histories in the first person. Tastefully written, accurate, and highly informative, they nonetheless were criticized by some ornithologists who declared them a fallacious method of representing bird life. But they were

enthusiastically received by teachers, whose pupils read them avidly. Forty-seven of these accounts were republished in two volumes, *American Bird Biographies* (1934) and *The Golden Plover and Other Birds* (1939).

Like Chapman, Allen found photography not only personally enjoyable but invaluable for illustrating his writings and lectures. Through the 1920's, Allen devoted more and more time to photography, perfecting his techniques and obtaining some of his most famous bird shots such as that of the Peregrine Falcon against the background of Taughannock Falls. He was soon taking motion pictures as well as stills and was consequently in increasing demand as a public lecturer.

Quite by chance in the spring of 1929, Allen hosted in Ithaca a crew from a motion-picture corporation whose assignment was to record the singing of wild birds synchronized with motion pictures. With his and Paul Kellogg's help, the crew succeeded in recording three species singing in Stewart Park. The equipment they used was much too impractical—and expensive—but the episode planted an idea in the minds of both Allen and Kellogg. They would seek a practical technique. In 1930 with Albert Brand's further encouragement and financial assistance, they set to work and in 1932, from recordings that they had obtained on film, Brand produced the first phonograph record of wild bird songs to come from Cornell, and Allen showed a film of drumming Ruffed Grouse with the natural sounds cleverly synchronized. From this year on Allen's achievements in photography were compounded by accomplishments in sound recording. In 1935 he led a Brand-financed expedition to film and record the voices of vanishing birds in southern and southwestern United States. He pursued these dual objectives on all his later expeditions.

By 1930 Allen was one of the best known figures in American ornithology. Thousands of people were acquainted with his manner on the platform—his slowly measured strides to the podium, the easy and unaffected flow of his diction while he stood motionless, his feet set firmly, his thumbs hooked in his vest pockets. Whether he showed slides or motion pictures, his accompanying commentary was pertinent and well timed. Though frequently humorous he was never theatrical. His pictures, always superb and often extraordinary, provided all the drama necessary.

Time was to prove that by 1930 Allen's role in popularizing ornithology had only begun. As Chapman had fostered the first surge, Allen in the next two decades fostered the second. In a sense, the Chapman era in popular ornithology was succeeded by the Allen era.

In 1934 Allen published an article, "Blackbirds and Orioles," in the *National Geographic Magazine*. This was the first of 20 articles he published in the magazine and marked the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship with its parent organization, the National Geographic Society.

His skilled photography and ability to write authoritatively and yet entertainingly about birds appealed so strongly to the Society's directors that the Society sponsored much of his photographic work and helped finance several expeditions. The advent of color film in the late 1930's greatly enhanced Allen's camera work and his pictures became all the more desirable. The *National Geographic* continued to increase its circulation, and Arthur Allen's reputation grew accordingly. In 1951 the Society gathered many of his articles and photographs from the *National Geographic* and published them in book form under the title *Stalking Birds with Color Camera*. An immensely popular book, it was reprinted several times before being revised and republished ten years later with his additional articles that had appeared in the magazine since 1951.

Many of Allen's associates and former students have regretted that he did not write more voluminously for scientific journals, setting down his immense store of observations in analytical form and propounding certain of his concepts of bird behavior which were highly original. Too often these were "lost" in his popular articles—for example his bird autobiographies— or were not written down at all. In a number of instances his enduring generosity led him to turn over his findings and ideas to other ornithologists for their use. In his popular articles and lectures, which he couched in layman's language, he never took license with biological truths. His scientific standards were always above criticism, and he was most critical of his own contributions.

Allen's later fame as a popular writer and lecturer tended to eclipse his pioneering contributions to ornithology. This he let happen, apparently by choice, preferring to let others continue along the lines of research that he had established. Research he gradually found insufficiently exciting and rewarding, perhaps much too confining, for his outgoing nature. And there is no denying that, with a large growing family to support on a professor's salary, the additional income that accrued from writing and lecturing was a motivating factor in his choice.

After the Second World War enrollment in Allen's classes continued heavy. Former graduate students returned from service, and new graduate students appeared. Seminars were held regularly, and graduate students attended scientific meetings without fail. But the Grad Lab was not quite the same. Many of the students were married, and most were more independent financially. Rarely did the Grad Lab hum with as much round the clock activity as in the early days.

Aside from his attention to classes and graduate students, Allen devoted most of his time to field excursions, photography, sound recordings, lecturing, and writing. His most notable postwar expedition was in 1948 to Alaska where, north of the Yukon, he and Henry Kyllingstad together

with Warren Peterson and Allen's younger son, David, discovered the first nest, eggs, and downy young of the Bristle-thighed Curlew. For this achievement they received the Burr Award from the National Geographic Society.

Three years before he was to retire from a faculty, a group of his graduate students decided: why wait until the customary inevitably tearful retirement dinner to pay him tribute; let's have a big dinner right away, as a complete surprise to him—it will be more meaningful. Secret plans were made forthwith in greatest detail; invitations to the dinner with requests for contributions toward a gift (round-trip tickets for him and Mrs. Allen to the International Ornithological Congress in Sweden) went to all his former graduate students and many friends. The dinner, a merry one, took place on April 8, 1950. Never were two people more surprised and never was a man showered with more congratulatory letters and telegrams that spoke from the heart.

By the time of Allen's retirement in 1953 well over 10,000 students had taken his undergraduate and summer-school courses and more than 100 students had obtained advanced degrees under his guidance and tutelage. Many were teaching ornithology in other institutions and several had developed extensive graduate school programs in ornithology of their own. Ornithology in the academic curriculum of American colleges and universities was, thanks to Allen's initiative and the pattern he had established, no longer uniquely Cornell's.

Retirement meant for Dr. Allen only a cessation of teaching responsibilities. That fall he and Mrs. Allen set out by car on a long lecture tour for the National Audubon Society. Again for several weeks each year until 1959 they traveled to different parts of the country for the Society, filling an engagement in one city one night, driving on to another city for another engagement the next night. The pace would have been strenuous for a much younger man, but his everlasting zest for lecturing buoyed him and his health continued vigorous.

With Paul Kellogg, Allen continued to produce phonograph records. Three of them—*Song Birds of America, Bird Songs in Your Garden,* and *Dawn in a Duckblind*—were in spirally bound books with color illustrations from the finest of his photographs and text he provided.

For many years the name "Laboratory of Ornithology" was the unofficial designation of the ornithological program Allen conducted. Not until 1955 did it become a separate department of Cornell University. Two years later it was housed in its own building, a new one, remote from the main campus. The heartwarming story of how this came about through the benevolence of Lyman K. Stuart, an Allen admirer and grateful friend, has been told in appropriate detail elsewhere (see "Cor-

nell's Laboratory of Ornithology" by Arthur A. Allen in *The Living Bird,* 1: 7–36, 1962). I need mention here only the role that the Laboratory played in Allen's last years.

When I returned to Cornell in 1960 to direct the Laboratory I realized how perfectly it reflected "Doc's" interests and personality. Obviously he had planned every inch of the building. An observatory and office with big windows overlooked a 10-acre pond and Sapsucker Woods beyond. There were darkrooms for processing film and a room for motion-picture projection and sound recording. In the corridors and observatory were elements of spaciousness, brilliance, and warmth, just as Allen wanted, for hosting and entertaining people.

Allen reveled in this setting and I believe that he regretted every moment he was away from it. Certainly he was in the Laboratory all day of every day when he was in town— and this was often, because he had given up lecture tours and other long trips. From the Laboratory windows he took many remarkable bird pictures, a good selection of which were published in his last (1962) *National Geographic* article, "Sapsucker Woods: Cornell University's Exciting New Bird Sanctuary."

The Laboratory was the center for all the local ornithological and related social activities that Allen had nurtured over the years—the seminars, the tallying point following the spring and summer bird censuses in the Cayuga Basin, the Christmas party for all Laboratory staff and students. For distinguished guests and returning alumni of the University, as well as for countless visitors to the main campus, it was a showplace to which trips were scheduled. And for ornithologists, amateur and professional, the country over, a stop at the Laboratory was a must whenever they were touring through upstate New York.

To all visitors, whether they were former students, simply friends, or total strangers, Allen was the ever-present and genial host. Nothing delighted him more than showing his guests around the building, telling how the Laboratory came into being, and explaining the Laboratory's functions.

The Laboratory was in a large sense a tribute to Allen, the ornithologist and great teacher, and the thousands of people who visited it were paying homage for the knowledge and enjoyment he had dispensed during his illustrious career. At no time did I realize this more than when Cornell was host to the International Ornithological Congress in 1962. To ornithologists attending from all over the world, Arthur A. Allen and his Laboratory of Ornithology were familiar names. Meeting him and visiting the Laboratory, as many stated later, were their most cherished moments of the Congress.

I am confident that Allen's last years in his beloved Laboratory were

among the happiest in his life. Usually he or I was the last to leave the building as suppertime neared—nobody worked around the clock any more. Often it was I who left first, leaving him—still reluctant to call it a day—gazing out the observatory window, perhaps pondering some new scheme for photographing the ducks that would settle in on the pond to feed, come the morrow.

MAJOR WORKS BY ARTHUR A. ALLEN

1914. The Red-winged Blackbird: A Study in the ecology of a cattail marsh. Abstract, Proc. Linn. Soc. New York, Nos. 24–25, 1911–13, pp. 43–128.
1924. A contribution to the life history and economic status of the Screech Owl (*Otus asio*). Auk, **41:** 1–16.
1930. The book of bird life. New York, D. Van Nostrand Company.
1933. Ornithological education in America. *In* Fifty years' progress of American ornithology, 1883–1933. American Ornithologists' Union.
1934. American bird biographies. Ithaca, New York. Comstock Publishing Company.
1934. Sex rhythm in the Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus* Linn.) and other birds. Auk, **51:** 180–199.
1939. The Golden Plover and other birds. Ithaca, New York. Comstock Publishing Company.
1944. An Arizona nest of the Coppery-tailed Trogon. Auk, **61:** 640–642.
1945. Some changes in the bird life of Churchill, Manitoba. Auk, **62:** 129–134.
1949. The eggs and young of the Bristle-thighed Curlew. (Co-authored by Henry Kyllingstad.) Auk, **66:** 343–350.
1951. Stalking birds with color camera. (Co-authored by others.) Second revised edition in 1961, third edition in 1963. Washington, D. C., National Geographic Society.
1961. The book of bird life. Revised edition. New York, D. Van Nostrand Company.

Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.