

## IN MEMORIAM: FRANCIS MARION WESTON

GEORGE H. LOWERY, JR.

FRANCIS MARION WESTON was once described as the "dean of Gulf Coast ornithologists." He was indeed greatly beloved and highly respected by all who knew him, and, as a result, he exerted a profound influence on many ornithologists with whom he came in contact. He was particularly known for his passion for meticulous accuracy and complete verification of field identifications. He insisted upon such high standards that he was one of the leaders of a generation of nonprofessional observers who did much to raise the quality of reporting to its present level. The fifty-three years of his life spent in residence at Pensacola, Florida, comprised a period of study that began when the birdlife of much of the northern gulf coast was poorly known.

Weston was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on 5 December 1887, the eldest of four children of John Tucker Weston and Eliza Ladson Webb Weston. He passed away in Pensacola on 3 April 1969. He is survived by two married daughters, Mrs. Laurie Delareuelle of Walnut Creek, California, and Mrs. Geneva Wagner of Jackson, Mississippi. His education was in the schools of Charleston, including the College of Charleston from which he graduated with the Bachelor of Science degree in June 1907. In the winter of 1907-08 he taught in a country school near Mt. Pleasant and from then until January 1914 he acted as a part-time evening assistant in the Charleston Museum. Beginning in 1908 and continuing until 1951, he worked as a Civil Service draftsman, first in the Charleston Navy Yard, and from February 1914 through January 1916 in the Bureau of Lighthouses in Washington, D.C. In February 1916, he was transferred to the Pensacola Naval Air Station, where he served until his retirement.

During his early years his interest in wildlife was fostered by his father, with whom he went on long and frequent bicycle trips into the countryside around Charleston. Later, when in college, he made the acquaintance of Herbert Ravenal Sass, who introduced him to bird study and who was Weston's constant mentor and friend until the time of his death in 1958. In the winter that Weston taught school at Mt. Pleasant he met the veteran South Carolina ornithologist Arthur T. Wayne and spent much of his spare time in the field with him. During his two years in Washington, 1914-16, he became acquainted with many of the leading ornithologists of the day, including Welles W. Cooke, Edgar A. Mearns, and J. H. Riley. At Cooke's request he began to make regular reports on birds observed to what was then known as the Bureau of Biological



FRANCIS MARION WESTON, 1887–1969  
(Photograph taken in November 1935)

Survey, now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In the mid-1960's he received a special commendation from that agency for being one of the very few volunteer collaborators who had made regular reports to the agency for more than fifty years. Particularly notable in this regard were Weston's contributions to Howell's "Florida bird life," published in 1932.

Weston became a member of the A.O.U. in 1925 and was elected a Fellow in 1953. As far as I am aware, he attended only three A.O.U. meetings, the ones in Charleston in 1937, in Baton Rouge in 1952, and in Gainesville in 1963.

Weston was always willing to give freely of his time in trying to encourage young people in the study of birds. Among his youthful protégés was the writer of this memorial. As a 13-year-old Boy Scout in 1927, seeking the Bird Study Merit Badge, which was then required for one to become an Eagle Scout, I went to Weston, the merit badge examiner, thinking that within an hour I would come away with his signature on my application. One of the requirements was to produce a list of 40 species of birds that had been identified by the applicant, and another

was to build two birdhouses and to tell what kinds of birds had been attracted to them. I prepared the list of birds that I had allegedly identified and it included such items as "duck," "goose," and "chi-chi." I shall never forget Weston's reaction to that list. I was told in no uncertain terms that not only must I specify, for example, the kind of duck, but that I must show him the species in the field, for otherwise he could not be sure that I really knew the bird. Moreover, since the only birds that had been attracted to my birdhouses had been House Sparrows, he informed me that I would have to do better than that. "Anybody can get House Sparrows," he pointed out in his firm but kindly way. The date was mid-July, too late to put up new nest boxes and to get Purple Martins, Carolina Wrens, or Eastern Bluebirds. Consequently, he made me wait until the following February, when Purple Martins alighted on my new erected boxes showing that they had been "attracted." Only then did he finally approve my application. In the meanwhile, he had been taking me on weekly field trips. By the time spring came, I had learned to his satisfaction far more than the required 40 species. Needless to say, my dedication to the subject was by then irrevocable. Although I soon moved back to my native state of Louisiana, I carried on a steady correspondence with Weston until the time of his death. I certainly never failed in all those years to write a letter to him on 17 July, the anniversary of my first field trip with him in 1927.

Many profited by their association with him. His legion of admirers included Burt L. Monroe, Jr., E. J. Koestner, the late Alexander Sprunt, Jr., and the late Thomas D. Burleigh, as well as all other ornithologists who have worked in the Pensacola area and on the northern gulf coast during the last half century. Weston's voluminous field notes were bequeathed to the Museum of Zoology at Louisiana State University, but photostatic copies have now been placed on file in the library of the University of West Florida at Pensacola.

Although Weston was not an especially prolific writer, some of his published works are classics of their kind. From 1924 through 1948 he prepared the Pensacola "Season" report for *Bird-Lore* and its sequel *Audubon Field Notes*. In those days reports covered only a series of rather small sample areas. In 1948 the country was subdivided into regions, delineated in part by natural or ecological boundaries, that provide in the seasonal summaries complete coverage of North America. Weston's "Pensacola (Fla.) region" was then incorporated into the newly constituted Central Southern Region, and someone else took over the compilation of records, to which Weston continued to contribute until his death. No less than 60 general notes by him appeared in *The Auk*, *Wilson Bulletin*, and *Florida Naturalist*. For "Bent's Life Histories" he

was the author of the accounts of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Bachman's Sparrow, both superbly well done. His most important single publication was his 147-page paper entitled "A survey of the birdlife of northwestern Florida" that was published in 1965 as Bulletin 5 of the Tall Timbers Research Station. This annotated list provides a detailed summary of his then nearly fifty years of observation of birds in the Pensacola area.

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