

IN MEMORIAM: ALEXANDER SPRUNT, JR.

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THE ornithological history of South Carolina is a rich one. Among the makers of that history were such luminaries as Mark Catesby and William Bartram in the 18th century, the Reverend John Bachman and his friend, John James Audubon, in the 19th, and Arthur T. Wayne in the 20th.

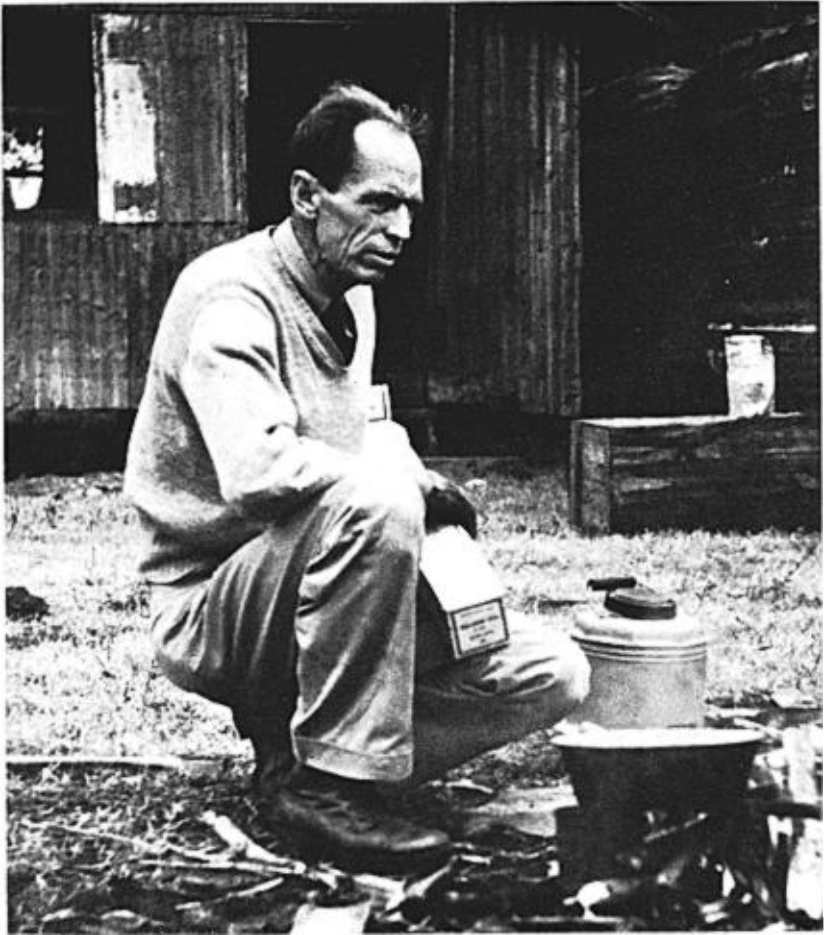
In the little town of Rock Hill, South Carolina, on January 16, 1898, Alexander Sprunt, Jr., was born, a native son who was destined to become another great contributor to ornithological history of his state. A few years after his birth, the family moved to Charleston. His father, the Rev. Alexander Sprunt, D.D., became pastor of the Scots Presbyterian Church, a position he held for 36 years. And son, Alex, remained an active, faithful member of that church for all the 76 years of his life.

Alex, as he was known to his close associates and friends, became interested in birds in early boyhood. He had a child's romantic interest in nature; he never lost those precious endowments, a sense of mystery and a sense of wonder. They were manifested throughout his entire life in his writings and lectures.

He took to the field early, a mere boy. While birds and their nests were his first love, his interests included all animals and even plants. He began taking meticulous notes, a practice that he developed to a high degree and one that was a great asset in his adult life. As was virtually a universal custom for boys in those days, young Alex collected birds' eggs—all part and parcel of a boy's romantic interest. While his boyhood collecting was neither extensive or long lasting, it did serve to develop what was to become a lifelong ornithological interest, which in turn became a lifelong avocation and profession.

Possessed of a good mind and desire to learn, Alex did well in school. He became an insatiable reader. One of his favorite authors was Ernest Thompson Seton, whose books on wild animals were among the best sellers of the time. Seton's influence on his young reader was great and is evident in the latter's later writings.

Alex attended two of Charleston's preparatory schools, Porter Military Academy and the Smith School. In 1914 at the age of 17 he entered Davidson College in North Carolina. He completed three years, but at the height of World War I in 1918, impelled by his patriotic fervor, Alex enlisted in the U.S. Navy where he served for two years. His military experience was a happy one and left him with a lifelong interest in U.S. naval history.



ALEXANDER SPRUNT, JR., 1898–1973

(Photograph taken circa 1956 on an Audubon Tour of the Kissimmee Prairie, Florida. Courtesy of National Audubon Society.)

Alex did not return to Davidson, nor to any other college, to complete his senior year and graduate. But at the height of his career in 1954, his Alma Mater, Davidson, bestowed upon its distinguished son an Honorary Degree of Science, thus making him a most honored alumnus.

Out of the Navy and in his early twenties, Alex had lost none of his interest in birds. How providential it was that the young man became a disciple and helpmate of Arthur T. Wayne, one of the greatest of all contributors to the ornithological history of South Carolina. No financial remuneration was thought of, or even possible, and gave his

services as a friend, spending much time at Wayne's home near Charleston.

Wayne was a tireless field man. After spending a long day afield, he would make bird skins late into the night. His disciples, and no one more than young Sprunt, were amazed at and inspired by Wayne's ability to identify birds without a field glass, his skill in collecting and preparing skins, and his great ability as a teacher. Small wonder that under the influence of such leadership, Alex decided to make ornithology a career.

In 1924 Alex took a part-time position at the Charleston Museum. Although he spent most of his time as a taxidermist and preparator of ornithological exhibits, he continued to collect and add to the birdskin collection.

In 1930 Arthur T. Wayne died. It was altogether fitting that Alexander Sprunt, Jr., and E. Burnham Chamberlain, then colleagues at the Charleston Museum and Wayne's disciples, should join in bringing their master's book, "The birds of South Carolina," up to date. Twenty years had elapsed since the publication of that book in 1910, and many new records had to be added. Wayne's book had the distinction of being the first state bird book of all the Southern States. The two young South Carolina ornithologists finished the job, and in 1931 the museum published the revision under the title, "Second supplement to Arthur T. Wayne's Birds of South Carolina."

Although he continued his ornithological field studies to greater or lesser degrees, by 1931 Alex was devoting more and more time to writing. In 1929 he had become a nature columnist for his home town newspaper, "The Charleston News and Courier," and his column "Woods and waters" appeared six days a week without a break for sixteen years! The subject matter ran virtually the whole gamut of natural history—birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, marine life, plants, haunts and habits, habitats, and environments and conservation. For such a wide-ranging column his knowledge derived from years of field experience and a prodigious amount of reading and research.

Through his newspaper column, magazine articles, and ornithological writings, Sprunt became known throughout the country. The birdlife of South Carolina, especially that of the Low Country, drew more and more amateur and professional bird students to the Charleston area. Many sought Sprunt's help and advice as to where they might see birds to the best advantage. He always responded generously and personally led many in the field.

On a visit to Charleston in 1934 John H. Baker, then executive head of the National Audubon Society, met Alex and promptly hired

him to be the Southern Representative of the society. This was a full-time job, involving travel throughout the South to supervise all the society's southern sanctuaries. Thus Alex Sprunt, whose operations had been confined mostly to the Low Country area, now embarked on a conservation mission embracing the whole country. Indeed he was the right man for such a responsibility; he had all the attributes of the true missionary, faith in and conviction of the rightness of the conservation cause and an extraordinary zeal to forward it. In many places where he preached it, his gospel was a new one. He liked people and they liked him. He would listen to those who opposed his views and thereby win their respect. His sincerity, his gift for describing dramatically, logically, and eloquently the need for and value of the wise use of all natural resources, won many converts—even those in areas where open hostility to the Audubon Society had prevailed.

Thus we see that Sprunt, the ornithologist, had become the bird protectionist. He had two good examples in the National Audubon Society who had done the same thing, William Dutcher and T. Gilbert Pearson. They, too, had started with birds as their paramount interest and later devoted virtually all of their time to bird protection. Dutcher and Pearson became the first and second presidents respectively of the National Audubon Society. Sprunt was happy in and devoted to his work with the society.

Capitalizing on Alex's ability as a speaker, the National Audubon Society gave him a major assignment in its new national wildlife film lecture program. He had one of the heaviest schedules of all, which involved speaking before adult groups at night and frequently in schools during the day, six days a week for two to three months each year. His lectures were illustrated with motion picture films taken by others especially for him. This activity broadened the base of his effectiveness widely, for in the years he lectured, ten at least, he spoke in all 48 contiguous states and all Canadian provinces. He was as zealous about his lecturing as all the other responsibilities of his position with the society. He looked upon it as a means of fulfilling a mission, to educate and convert, and he gave every lecture as if it were his last and the most important.

For several months each year Alex led Audubon Wildlife Tours by station wagon. He pioneered in this activity, starting the tours in the Lake Okeechobee-Kissimmee Prairie region of Florida, and also at Cobb's Island in Virginia. Later he conducted the tours to Bull's Island, South Carolina, and during the last years of his career into the society's 12,000 acre Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in southwest Florida. Persons from all over the country and Canada participated in these tours. An extraor-

dinary interpreter of the whole environment, explaining its human history as well as its natural history, he was an inspirational field leader.

Despite his heavy Audubon schedule, Alex continued to write. Early in his career he became associated with the American Ornithologists' Union, first in 1923 as an Associate Member, and in 1928 became an Elective Member. In 1950 he was accorded the honor of being elected a Fellow. His contributions to *The Auk* started in 1924 and continued through 1966, a total of 168 under his own name, consisting of papers, general notes, reviews, and obituaries. In addition, ten others were co-authored by him and J. J. Murray, E. B. Chamberlain, and E. von S. Dingle.

Alex and his former colleagues at the Charleston Museum again collaborated in co-authoring "South Carolina bird life," a complete and well-illustrated book published in 1949. The four artists whose paintings were reproduced in the book were John Henry Dick, Edward von S. Dingle, Francis Lee Jaques, and Roger Tory Peterson. Sprunt's "Album of southern birds" appeared in 1953, his "Florida bird life" in 1954. He revised and expanded "North American birds of prey" and was a major contributor to "The warblers of North America," which were published in 1955 and 1957 respectively. His "Carolina Low Country impressions," a collection of essays, appeared in 1964.

His very active life came to an end suddenly on January 3, 1973 as a result of a heart attack in his home in Charleston where his widow still lives. His son, Alexander ("Sandy") Sprunt IV, is Director of Research for the National Audubon Society, and lives in Tavernier, Florida, where the society has its scientific headquarters.

In appreciation of Alex Sprunt's great contributions to the Audubon cause, the society set out to establish an appropriate memorial. It obtained a long-term lease from the State of South Carolina on Deveaux Bank, an island outside of Charleston. It will be named the Alexander Sprunt, Jr., Sanctuary, and an Audubon warden will protect the Brown Pelicans, Royal and Gull-billed Terns, and other species that regularly nest on the island—a fitting memorial to one who shaped the hearts and minds of hosts of persons, giving them the gifts of appreciation and concern for the ineffable beauty of the natural world.

7814 Marion Lane, Bethesda, Maryland 20014. Accepted 12 May 1975.