

IN MEMORIAM: CHARLES VAURIE

LESTER L. SHORT

Shortly after arriving in the United States from Paris for his customary summer's stay in Pennsylvania, Charles Vaurie was taken ill, and he died suddenly during exploratory surgery at a hospital in Reading, Pennsylvania, on 13 May 1975. Active until a week before his death, he recently had returned to Paris from a study trip to the British Museum at Tring. His last major work, a monograph treating the ovenbirds (Furnariidae), was essentially finished, and Charles had been planning as his next project a long-term investigation of the Eremian (ancient Tethys Sea basin, from Gibraltar and the Mediterranean to the eastern Himalayas and the Gobi Desert) avifauna. He is survived by his wife Patricia, and by a sister, Mrs. Ray Weatherby of Summit, New Jersey.

Born in Beaulieu, Corrèze, France, on 7 July 1906, he came to the United States as a youth, first living in Trenton, New Jersey, then in New York City, where he completed high school. He was a Socialist during part of his youth, and this colored his views on many matters throughout his life. After studies at New York University he entered the dental school of the University of Pennsylvania, receiving his D.D.S. degree in 1928. Postgraduate work followed at Eastman Clinic in Rochester, New York, and then he set up a dental practice in New York City. During this early period of his life he became interested in birds as a subject for his art work. (He produced several paintings of North American birds in a rather impressionistic style during the late 1920's.) He met Patricia Wilson in New York; the two were married in 1934, and were almost inseparable thereafter, the marriage proving to be an exceptionally happy one. Pattie, as she is familiarly known, proved to be a wonderful companion, friend, and wife. Her career in entomology reflects a similar natural history interest, and the two shared the pleasure of numerous field trips and vacation "work" trips planned to enable them to collect coleopterous insects.

While Vaurie was practicing dentistry in New York City in the early 1940's, one of his friends showed some of his bird paintings to James Chapin, who suggested that Vaurie come to see him, commenting that the drawings indicated a lack of knowledge of bird structure. Thus, Charles met and became a close friend of Chapin, who introduced him to the ornithological staff of the American Museum of Natural History, with which he thenceforth was associated until his death. Delighted with this association, Vaurie underwent the informal training that comes from working closely with professionals. Ernst Mayr particularly was



CHARLES VAURIE, 1906–1975

(Photographed at his desk in the American Museum of Natural History in 1969.)

his tutor, and largely was responsible for channeling Vaurie's enthusiasm and meticulousness into directions that proved productive. In 1942 Charles became a volunteer in the Museum's Ornithology Department, and by 1946 he was a Research Associate spending ever more time at the Museum and less time on his dental practice. The first of his more than 150 publications treating birds appeared in 1946, and by 1948 he had coauthored a paper with Mayr on evolution in the *Dicruridae*. Vaurie's initial report in the series treating the Walter Koelz collection was published in 1949. By the early 1950's, at Mayr's instigation, Vaurie was working on his major opus, the systematic review of Palearctic birds, originally planned with the view of coauthoring it with a Russian collaborator, a plan that soon was given up. Frustrated by his dual career, Charles was very pleased, indeed overjoyed, to quit dentistry

entirely in 1956, when he was afforded the opportunity of joining the staff of the American Museum of Natural History as an Assistant Curator. There he attained the rank of Associate Curator, and ultimately (1967) Curator before his retirement in 1972. Thus Vaurie was able to devote about 19 years fully to ornithology, following about a dozen years of mixing ornithology with dentistry. Despite his embarking upon an ornithological career relatively late in life, Vaurie was exceptionally productive, a tribute to his ability and industry, to those who trained him, and to an environment in which he was essentially free to pursue his research full-time.

If one were to select one word most descriptive of Charles Vaurie it would have to be "meticulous." He painstakingly busied himself with measuring and comparing vast arrays of specimens, and persistently worked long hours without tiring or relaxing his attention to details. A self-taught artist and draftsman, he prepared all his own maps rather than trusting them to trained staff personnel. The accuracy and clarity of Vaurie's maps were a source of pride to him. Indeed, he had a special fondness for maps, and frequented map dealers and geographical institutes in the countries that he visited. His geographical knowledge and ability are reflected in the fact that, after his retirement, he was offered a teaching position in the geography department of a small Pennsylvania college.

Vaurie's two-volume "Birds of the Palearctic Fauna" (1959, 1965), 1535 pages backed by 958 pages of more detailed discussion in his 53-publication series "Systematic Notes on Palearctic Birds" in the American Museum Novitates, stands as his most important achievement. A clear, concise summary of the distribution and variation of Palearctic species, supported by the more detailed systematic notes, this treatment quickly gained acceptance as the major reference work on the Palearctic avifauna, and brought Vaurie international acclaim. His treatment of subspecies in the Palearctic work especially was a sound balance between widespread earlier "splitting" and the modern "lumping" tendency. To those who feel that subspecies have a value it is fortunate that the Palearctic treatise preceded his gradual disenchantment with the avian subspecies concept in the late 1960's, for his later works show his disinclination to undertake the detailed analysis of intraspecific variation that characterized his early studies.

Among his other outstanding publications must be mentioned the Mongolian survey (1964) and the Tibetan book (1972), which were based upon extensive search of the literature and comparison of specimens. Both represent the most authoritative work on the avifauna of the

respective regions. His historical perspectives particularly are embodied in the Tibetan book. We are awaiting eventual publication of his monograph of the Furnariidae, a thumbnail sketch of which appeared with his major conclusions and few supporting details in the "Classification of the Ovenbirds" (1971). Character displacement in rock nuthatches (*Sitta*) was the subject of important papers in 1950, 1952, and 1956; some of his conclusions have been criticized recently, but generally appear sound to this writer. Many biologically interesting situations were treated in his other systematic papers, e.g. hybridization in tits (1957, on *Parus caeruleus*), and in woodpeckers (1959, systematic notes no. 36 on *Dendrocopos*). His final, fully completed study was of the Cracidae, providing detailed variational and distributional treatment that immensely assisted his colleagues Jean Delacour and Dean Amadon in preparing their fine book on that group, a book originally planned with Vaurie as a coauthor before difficulties ruled out this collaboration. Just prior to his passing, Charles was considering production of a book on Arabian birds, using material that was unavailable to Colonel Meinertzhagen for the latter's treatise on the birds of that region.

His facility with languages and his Palearctic interests gained Vaurie many correspondents and access to literature not readily available, or usable. Charles performed valuable services in abstracting foreign, especially Russian literature, and in calling attention to major Russian treatises through the vehicle of reviews in *The Auk*. He was perhaps the most widely known and respected American ornithologist in the U.S.S.R., which he visited several times. His service to ornithology also includes efforts in the complex field of zoological nomenclature, for he prepared many carefully documented reports and opinions on scientific names. At the time of his death he was a member of the Standing Committee on Ornithological Nomenclature of the International Ornithological Congress, and for a time had been its Chairman.

Ever wrapped in his work and thoughts, Charles paid little heed to administrative chores, the burden of which fell to his colleagues, and he was able to give 90 percent or more of his working time to research. Visitors and passersby without serious matters to discuss often were shunted aside abruptly. Conversations with him at times were frustrating experiences, for he was prone to interrupt, to voice his opinion sprinkled with an occasional, insistent "humm, mm, mm"—without giving a pause to let the other party into the "conversation." Though not always a good listener, he was an entertaining raconteur. In matters relating to his sphere of interest he was quick and frank in offering his opinion and advice, and he was pleased to help friends whenever he could do so.

Away from his work desk he was very hospitable and enjoyed having guests at his apartment for dinner and an evening of conversation or slide-viewing. In contrast to his oral expressions that often were categorically and sometimes tactlessly expressed, his ornithological writing was cautious and he strove to present both sides of a question fairly.

Not without humor, Charles once presented me with an early example of his art work, a portrait of a pair of Common Flickers (eastern *Colaptes auratus*). With a wry smile, he asked "Look at this closely, do you see anything unusual?" After viewing the portrait for a half minute I could find nothing and told him so—his smile broadened as he fired back "Look at the rump." Whereupon I was astonished to note that he had used the spotting about the edges of the rump to form examples of all four suits of cards!

Although in many ways he epitomized the finest aspects of the "armchair" taxonomist (who other than he would have been able to tackle, with fair success, the Furnariidae, despite a dearth of field experience with the group and no anatomical studies?), Vaurie also engaged in field work, particularly in the West Indies. His second publication treated early morning bird song during the latter part of the summer. Noteworthy are his Cuban bird observations (1957; he had visited Cuba frequently prior to his ornithological career) and report of birds seen on the Îles des Saintes, Guadeloupe (1961). However, most of his field time was spent assisting Pattie in collecting and treating beetle specimens, hence field observations of birds necessarily were obtained casually.

Charles thoroughly enjoyed visits to art galleries, musical performances, and seeing the architecture of notable edifices. During the 1970 International Ornithological Congress he packed easel and paints and was off to Amsterdam in the early morning to render in paints the awakening life of that city. He was an excellent photographer, his slides showing the close attention to composition that marked his paintings. After his retirement, the Vauries divided their time between Paris, where Charles studied birds at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (he was a corresponding member of that institution and Pattie held a research associateship in entomology), and their home near Kutztown, Pennsylvania. They enjoyed Paris, where Charles was greatly respected and esteemed for his expertise by his colleagues at the Museum. They were especially happy summering in rural Pennsylvania where they had acquired a schoolhouse, which was remodeled according to Charles' exacting specifications. Here they gardened, rambled about the woods and fields, conducted some research (Charles usually devoted several hours a day to his ovenbird material), and frequently entertained weekend guests. Never did I see Charles

happier than when he was escorting visitors about the delightful "Pennsylvania Dutch" countryside.

Charles Vaurie's diligence, patience and ability led him to exploit a niche successfully, to ornithology's great benefit. He will be missed by his friends, and by his science, for his talents are all too rarely found today.

A five-page bibliography of Charles Vaurie's works is available on request from the author at *The American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, New York 10024.*