IN MEMORIAM: ALEXANDER WETMORE

PAUL H. OEHSER
9012 Old Dominion Drive, McLean, Virginia 22102 USA

If anyone could be called the 20th-century doyen of American ornithology, it was Alexander Wetmore. From his very youth the study of birds was his passion. He trained himself as a biologist and never wavered from his devotion to science during his long life. Bird migration, classification, distribution, avian paleontology, and collecting all claimed his expert attention, and he lived to enjoy a deserved reputation as a world authority in these fields. Although it was sometimes said, probably truthfully, that he did not relish administrative duties, he managed during his long service in the Federal Government to become involved in a great many of them, and he performed them with distinction. His contributions to and activities in the scientific community were not only local (i.e. Washington, D.C.) but also national and international. I knew him for 53 years.

(Frank) Alexander Wetmore was born at North Freedom, a town in south-central Wisconsin, on June 18, 1886, the son of Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia (Woodworth) Wetmore. His father was a country doctor. Alec attended school in nearby Baraboo, walking the 6 miles. As a small boy he developed a precocious interest in natural history, stimulated probably by his mother. When he was only 13 he wrote his first published paper, "My experience with the Red-headed Woodpecker." His mother, being in poor health, could not endure the Wisconsin winters and would often take Alec with her to more southern climates. When he was 18 he went with her to Independence, Kansas, where he graduated from high school the following spring. He worked that summer as a night clerk at the Santa Fe Railroad station. Before he was 20 he had his first museum job, as an assistant at the University of Kansas Museum. There he came under the guidance of Charles D. Bunker, who said that Wetmore "knew from the earliest time what he wanted to do." In 1910 he was given his first Federal Government position, that of agent for the Biological Survey, then a bureau of the United States Department of Agriculture. Two years later, after receiving his A.B. degree from the University of Kansas, he was promoted to assistant biologist with the Survey and went to Washington, where he began working in the bureau's studies of the food habits of North American birds.

These early years in Washington proved a rare experience for Wetmore, for he was able to meet and associate with some of the distinguished biologists there—C. Hart Merriam, Henry W. Henshaw, Edward W. Nelson, Albert Kenrick Fisher, Leonhard Stejneger, Robert Ridgway, Charles W. Richmond, and Theodore S. Palmer. And there were other colleagues in that rare group at the Survey who provided a happy milieu for bird-talk and congenial association—Vernon and Florence Bailey, Waldo L. McAtee, Edward A. Preble, E. R. Kalmbach, Frederick C. Lincoln, Edward A. Goldman, Ira N. Gabrielson, Olaus J. Murie, Remington Kellogg, Hartley H. T. Jackson, Wells Woodbridge Cooke, and others who influenced him in various degrees. His early assignments with the Survey gave him invaluable experience as a field biologist and collector. He became notably expert in skinning and preparing bird specimens. His technique included binding the cotton body so tightly that he needed no stick or wire for support in smaller skins. Many of the sea

ALEXANDER WETMORE, 1886–1978

birds he salted rather than making them up fully at the time of collection, waiting, as he said, for them to be prepared before starting study and publication. In 1911 he went to Puerto Rico and spent nearly a year studying the avifauna of that and adjacent islands. He investigated and published on the mortality among waterfowl around Great Salt Lake, Utah. In 1920 he went to South America to study the North American birds that migrate into the southern part of that continent, and in 1923 he led the *Tanager* exploring expedition to the islands of the mid-Pacific, sponsored by the Biological Survey and the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu. This was one of the few Wetmore enterprises that resulted in no publication, except

for his article in the July 1925 *National Geographic* magazine,[1] although the many sea and land birds (some since extinct) collected have been very useful in later studies by others. Other investigations took him to most of the (then) 48 states as well as to parts of Alaska and Canada.

When Ned Hollister, superintendent of the National Zoological Park, died suddenly in November 1924, Wetmore was named by Smithsonian Secretary Charles D. Walcott as Hollister's successor, a post that he held only a few months, for the following March Walcott made him Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian in direct charge of the U.S. National Museum. This position he held for almost 20 years, until, in 1945, he was appointed sixth Secretary of the Smithsonian succeeding Charles Greeley Abbot, who had retired. Wetmore was the second ornithologist to hold the prestigious Secretaryship of the Smithsonian Institution, the first being Spencer Fullerton Baird, who may be said to have been the prime force in establishing the U.S. National Museum and whose personal collection of thousands of specimens of birds and other animals, which he brought from Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1850, was the nucleus of the great museum that Wetmore was to administer.

During his years as a Smithsonian administrator Wetmore in his quiet way, following more or less the traditional patterns of his predecessors, fostered the Institution's laboratory and field researches in natural history, anthropology, and industrial arts; gave special encouragement to fundamental research by the staff; and laid the foundations for expanding the exhibits, buildings, and programs that came to fruition in later administrations. He was not a flamboyant innovator, but his work was as effective as might have been expected during those war and postwar years when government appropriations were sharply limited. During Wetmore's administration two agencies were added to the Smithsonian organization—the National Air Museum (now housed in its great new building called the National Air and Space Museum) and the Canal Zone Biological Area (now called the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute).

After he went to Washington, Wetmore continued his academic studies at George Washington University, earning his M.A. degree in 1916 and the Ph.D. in 1920. His master's dissertation was "A study of the body temperatures of birds," his doctor's on "The birds of Porto Rico." He later received honorary doctorates from the University of Wisconsin, George Washington University, Centre College, and Ripon College.

He was involved in the affairs of many scientific organizations, both government and nongovernment. Of these, perhaps his greatest devotion was to the American Ornithologists' Union, which he first joined in 1908; he was made a Life Fellow in 1919. He served a term (1926–1929) as President and was Honorary President from

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[1] This article, entitled "Bird Life among Lava Rock and Coral Sand," recounts the *Tanager* party's visits to Nihoa, Necker, Gardner, Laysan, and other islands and reefs of the Hawaiian group. Particularly interesting is Wetmore's account of the rabbits on Laysan. The party found that the prolific progeny of three or four pairs of rabbits brought to the island in 1902 had so denuded the island's vegetation that eventually they ran out of food and slowly starved to death. "Of the vast army of the destroyers only a few hundred remained." These survivors were dispatched by Wetmore and companions; "it was necessary to hunt them out one at a time." "A party sent to Laysan a year after our visit reported no sign of a single survivor."

1975 until his death (the only person ever so honored), and was active on the Council and many of the Union's committees, notably its Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, which, under his chairmanship, engineered the compilation and publication (in 1957) of the fifth (and latest to date) edition of the A.O.U. Check-list. I had the pleasure of assisting him with the editorial chores of this volume and seeing it through the press.

He was especially devoted also to the Washington Biologists' Field Club, to which he was elected in 1915; he served as its president, 1928–1931. At the time of his death he was the Club's senior member. Plummers Island, the Club's "hideaway" in the Potomac River a few miles above Washington in Maryland, held special attraction for him. Here, ever since the Club was organized at the turn of the century, a group of Washington biologists had gathered for recreation and serious research; its members have made classic studies of the biota of the island and environs, and it has been said that Plummers Island may hold some kind of record for the number of species of animals for which it is the type locality. Wetmore, as long as his health permitted, or until about 1975, made weekend trips to the island and, binoculars in hand, hiked along the nearby C. and O. Canal indulging in his favorite pastime—bird-watching.

In 1940, on the eve of World War II, Wetmore was made Secretary-General of the Eighth American Scientific Congress, which met in Washington that year. This was a signal honor, for it recognized his distinction among the leading scientists of the Western Hemisphere and his well-known familiarity with Latin America. Held under the auspices of the Division of International Conferences of the Department of State, it was the largest conference of its series ever held. The proceedings of the conference, assembled and published in 12 volumes by the Department of State under Wetmore's general direction and my editorship, formed an imposing record of this international event, which has not since been repeated.

Another important assignment came to him in February 1948, when President Truman appointed him chairman of the Interdepartmental Committee on Research and Development, which had been created the previous December following a careful study of the postwar need for an organized correlation of the Nation's scientific research. Of this appointment the *Washington Evening Star* commented editorially: "Dr. Wetmore's training and practice would mean little were they not supported by a natural talent for getting along with people. His statesmanship is a notable asset in relation to the job to which the President has named him. Thirteen other Government officers are to serve with him, and each of them presents qualities of distinction . . . The Committee is pledged to the 'promotion of the national welfare' in the full and complete meaning of the phrase. It will seek and effect correlation of research effort wherever it may be going forward."

His affiliations with many other scientific groups were anything but perfunctory. Besides those already mentioned, he served as President of the Washington Academy of Sciences, the Cosmos Club of Washington, the Explorers Club of New York, the Biological Society of Washington, the Baird Ornithological Club, and the Tenth International Ornithological Congress (Uppsala, 1950). He was a Trustee of the National Geographic Society (beginning in 1933) and a long-time member of its Committee for Research and Exploration and (for many years) served as the Committee's Vice-Chairman. His association with the National Geographic Society gave him much satisfaction; he frequently contributed to its publications, notably

as the principal author-editor of the popular 2-volume *Book of Birds* (1937) and its 2-volume successor (1965), *Water, Prey, and Game Birds of North America* and *Song and Garden Birds of North America.* In 1957 he was the recipient of the Society's Hubbard Medal. He was an active member also of the International Committee for International Wildlife Protection and, by virtue of his Smithsonian Secretaryship, was a Trustee of the Research Corporation of New York. After he retired as Secretary in 1952 he served as Home Secretary of the National Academy of Sciences, of which he was a member. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society, Trustee of the Textile Museum of Washington and of George Washington University, a Director of the Gorgas Memorial Institute of Tropical and Preventive Medicine, a Fellow of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, a recipient of the Geoffrey St. Hilaire Medal of the Societé Nationale d'Acclimatation de France—to name only a few of his many professional honors and scientific associations not already herein mentioned.

Dr. Wetmore's association with the Gorgas Memorial Institute deserves more than passing comment. He was a member of its Board of Directors from 1949 to 1976 and of its Executive Committee from 1949 to 1973, and was a research associate of the Institute's Laboratory, which he made his headquarters for field research on his many trips to the Republic of Panamá. Recognizing his many outstanding contributions to the work of the Laboratory, the Laboratory in 1973 named a canopy bridge in the Bayano River Basin area the "Alexander Wetmore Bridge." It hangs from two 3/4-inch steel weathered cables anchored to three large trees, with its 150-foot expanse built into the canopy of a forest that covers a slope. The entrance platform, built on a tree at the top of the slope, is 15 feet above ground, while the terminal platform, down the slope, is 75 feet above the forest floor. The Wetmore canopy bridge, first in the Western Hemisphere, has contributed significantly to numerous research studies of great biomedical importance; it was constructed with the help of expert personnel from the Panama Canal and a grant from the National Geographic Society.

Named in his honor also was the Wetmore Glacier in the Antarctic, the southernmost of two glaciers flowing into the head of Gardner Bay, south of the Richard Black Coast. It was named by Cmdr. Finn Ronne, leader of the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition, 1946–48, in recognition of Wetmore's assistance in laying out the scientific research program of the expedition.

Some 56 new genera, species, and subspecies of birds (both Recent and fossil), insects, mammals, mollusks, amphibians, and one plant (a cactus from Argentina) bear scientific names given in his honor. The latest in his list, which he proudly kept and referred to as his "private zoo," is a new genus and species of fossil bird from Baja California, described by Pierce Brodkorb in 1976 and referred to a new family (Alexornithidae) and new order (Alexornithiformes).

Wetmore's bibliography would fill many pages. His technical contributions, appearing over three-quarters of a century chiefly in biological journals and Smithsonian series, were myriad. Some of his larger works included: *Observations on the Birds of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Chile* (1926), *The Migration of Birds* (1927), *Birds of Porto Rico and the Dominican Republic* (1931), and *Fossil Birds of North America* (1931). He also proposed and published a *Systematic Classification for the Birds of the World,* which in several editions found wide acceptance; and the sequence of families he proposed is called the Wetmore order. His *magnum opus,*

however, was the work on which he was engaged during his later years—*The Birds of the Republic of Panamá*. Three volumes of this were published by the Smithsonian Press, in 1965, 1968, and 1972. The fourth and concluding volume, climaxing the scientific labors of this productive man, was left unfinished because of his declining health, but his colleagues at the Smithsonian are completing it for publication. This work, one must emphatically state, is not an armchair compilation but is based on his many field trips in Panamá (his last in 1966), his assiduous collection of bird specimens in that country extending over many years, and his unmatched knowledge of the pertinent literature. "My personal studies in the field," he wrote, "began in 1944 and have continued annually for approximately three months each year since 1946, with laboratory investigation of specimens and a survey of the published works of others who have made contributions in this region."

Wetmore took special interest, pride, and satisfaction in promoting the scientific publications of the Smithsonian, valuing the long-time publication tradition of the Institution built up by his predecessors, as one of the factors on which its world-wide reputation rests. As an example, he was solicitous in seeing that Arthur Cleveland Bent, who would frequently come to Washington from Taunton, Massachusetts, to work on his great series on life histories of North American birds, received all possible help at the Museum in researching and compiling his manuscripts. Wetmore lived to see the 21-volume Bent life histories series completed and published by the Smithsonian as Bulletins of the United States National Museum. He regretted that Ridgway's Bulletin 50, "Birds of North and Middle America," was never completed.

Wetmore's own library, containing a remarkably extensive collection of the literature of natural history, exploration, and travel, was meticulously cared for and organized and was the envy of all who saw it, demonstrating as it did his love of books, his wide knowledge of scientific literature past and present, and his persistence and wisdom as a book collector. He bequeathed his books partly to the Smithsonian Institution and partly to the Welder Wildlife Foundation at Sinton, Texas. He also left a large bequest to the Smithsonian for research in ornithology.

For Wetmore there was no such thing as retirement. For a quarter of a century after he officially retired at 66 from his Smithsonian post he kept his office-laboratory in the Natural History Building, and his research went on as usual. He was there early in the morning, including Saturdays; often lunchtime would find him at the Cosmos Club, but he would be back for more work in the afternoon. Frequently also he would lunch from a brown bag in the Division of Birds library with the younger curators and visitors and share accounts of older ornithologists, ornithological news, and new research findings. He gave generously of his time to younger biologists tapping his knowledge, and many of those so privileged speak enthusiastically of his friendly and considerate help. Though a man of great dignity and reserve, he was not hard to know, and he had hundreds of friends, at home and abroad. When he was Smithsonian Secretary, some of his subordinates did not always get what they wanted and sometimes thought him overconservative administratively and perhaps outwardly austere, but this was on the surface. A naturalist-colleague, John K. Terres, well described him in a 1948 article in *Audubon Magazine*:

> "The quiet-spoken Wetmore is a striking figure, whether speaking before a scientific meeting, or collecting birds in the heart of a tropical forest.

> His tall, wiry frame is erect, his smooth white hair, close-cropped, his hazel eyes steady behind plain rimless glasses. About him there is an air of quiet modesty, but of hidden strength, emphasized by his clean-shaven jaw, wide firm mouth, and slightly uptilted nose. His deep, drawling voice and earnest manner command respect, and he seldom speaks at length unless he has something worth telling. Although he likes the company of men, particularly scientists, he is happiest when he is with birds."

And the story is told that once while he was on a field expedition in East Africa the group he was with stood gazing at the sight of tens of thousands of flamingos at Lake Nakuru. Seeing Wetmore strolling along the lake shore on his long limber legs, a woman member of the group remarked, "That bird-man! Why, he looks like a water bird himself."

His backyard bird feeder was a great joy to him and over many years must have been visited by millions of hungry "feathered friends." Quite naturally, he could not abide such bird-molesters as cats, squirrels, and cowbirds inimical to the interest of his backyard avian haven. The efficiency of his cat traps was notorious, and the Museum's Division of Mammals finally had more feline skeletons from him than it really wanted.

He was a man of serious mien and temperament, but he enjoyed a good story and liked to relate the bizarre and humorous experiences gained on his many trips and from his multifarious contacts with men and women in all walks of life and in places far and near. He liked to tell, for example, of the time when, in skinning a small mammal, he became infested with mites. Mindful that the arachnid specialist at the National Museum might want some specimens, he collected a few from one of the remoter parts of his anatomy and put them in a vial of alcohol with a label, which read (in part): "If this proves to be a new species, the type locality is off limits to future collecting."

During the May Day 1971 demonstrations in Washington he was irked by the crowds that gathered outside the Attorney General's office, across the street from the Natural History Building. The next morning on his way to his museum office, he was driving through Georgetown when he saw that some demonstrators had stretched a rope across the street, presumably to stop and harass motorists. Instead of slowing down, he gunned his motor, scattering a few demonstrators who persisted in holding on to the rope. He was stopped by a policeman a few blocks farther on. He asked the cop, "What's the matter? Did I hurt someone?" The cop replied, "Unfortunately, no. We noticed that a rope is wrapped around your axle, and we want to pull it loose." This was a few weeks before his 85th birthday.

During his Smithsonian Secretary years, which required unending attention to official duties, he insisted on carrying on his bird work, mostly on his own time. He would come downtown early in the morning from his home in suburban Maryland on the outskirts of Washington, spend several hours free from disturbances in his laboratory at the National Museum, and then dutifully walk across the Mall to his office in the old Smithsonian Building and do another day's work. It was only this unstinting devotion to his ornithology, which became something of a conversation piece among his colleagues, that enabled him to produce so much while he was still so busy with the details and demands of official Smithsonian affairs.

It is impossible to overstate Alexander Wetmore's impact on American—indeed on world—ornithology. There was a little about birds, Recent and fossil, that he

did not know; and what he did not know he continually sought in the true scientific spirit, realizing that, in spite of the fact that birds are better known than perhaps any other group of the animal kingdom, no one will ever know it all. It was this kind of challenge that has always inspired the great biologists, and Wetmore was one of them. In 1976, honoring his 90th birthday, the Smithsonian Press published a Festschrift of "Collected Papers in Avian Paleontology," written by other experts in that field. It included a list of 155 publications by Wetmore in that field alone, covering the years 1917–1972. The editor of the volume, Storrs L. Olson, a Smithsonian colleague, remarked, "One cannot help but be humbled to think that this is but a fraction of his total scientific output. His stupendous work in ornithology is staggering": he has "described 189 species and subspecies of the birds previously unknown." And to these statistics may be added the fact that he enriched the national collections by some 26,058 mammal and bird skins from North America, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Spain, Central America, and Panamá, prepared and contributed 4,363 skeletal and anatomical specimens, and collected 201 clutches of eggs from North, Central, and South America.

In 1912 Wetmore was married to Fay Holloway, of Kansas, who died in 1953. They had one daughter, Margaret. His second marriage was to Annie Beatrice (Bea) Thielen, who accompanied him on many of his Panamá trips and spent much time in his Museum office. His widow and daughter (Margaret Fenwick Harlan, of Gloucester, Virginia) were the only immediate survivors.

Dr. Wetmore died of congestive heart failure on December 7, 1978, following a few years' physical decline, at his home in Glen Echo, Maryland. Interment was at North Cohocton, New York. On December 18 a memorial service was held in the Great Hall of the old Smithsonian Building in Washington. Tributes were given by Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, the Very Rev. Francis B. Sayre, and the Rev. Loring Chase.

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