

IN MEMORIAM: EUGENE EISENMANN

JOHN BULL AND DEAN AMADON

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Back in August of 1938 the senior writer was observing birds at Tobay Pond on Long Island. Among the waders present on that occasion, now more than 40 years ago, were not only numerous yellowlegs of both species and dowitchers, but also a few others that did not seem to fit in. Were they Stilt Sandpipers, a bird he had never seen? After conferring with another birder who was standing nearby, the decision was that they were indeed that uncommon species.

The stranger proved to be Eugene ("Gene") Eisenmann. He and Bull soon became close friends and, years later, colleagues at The American Museum of Natural History. Amadon met Eisenmann at about this time too, and also in the field where, again after a consultation, they decided a slightly aberrant plover was not, unfortunately, a Wilson's.

Gene had graduated from Harvard University and Harvard Law School during the Great Depression. Failing to find immediate suitable employment he visited Egypt and pondered his future from the back of a camel! After returning he joined the firm of Proskauer and Mendelsohn in New York as a trial lawyer, became a partner, and practiced successfully, but found the work increasingly irksome. When the firm, like so many others, moved from lower Manhattan, where Gene had a fine old-fashioned office with a view of the harbor, to a monotonous glass tower on Park Avenue, it was the last straw and Gene retired. He had sufficient funds to live modestly a few blocks from the Museum, first with an elderly aunt and, after her death, alone. Often he would invite friends to stay with him when they were visiting the Museum.

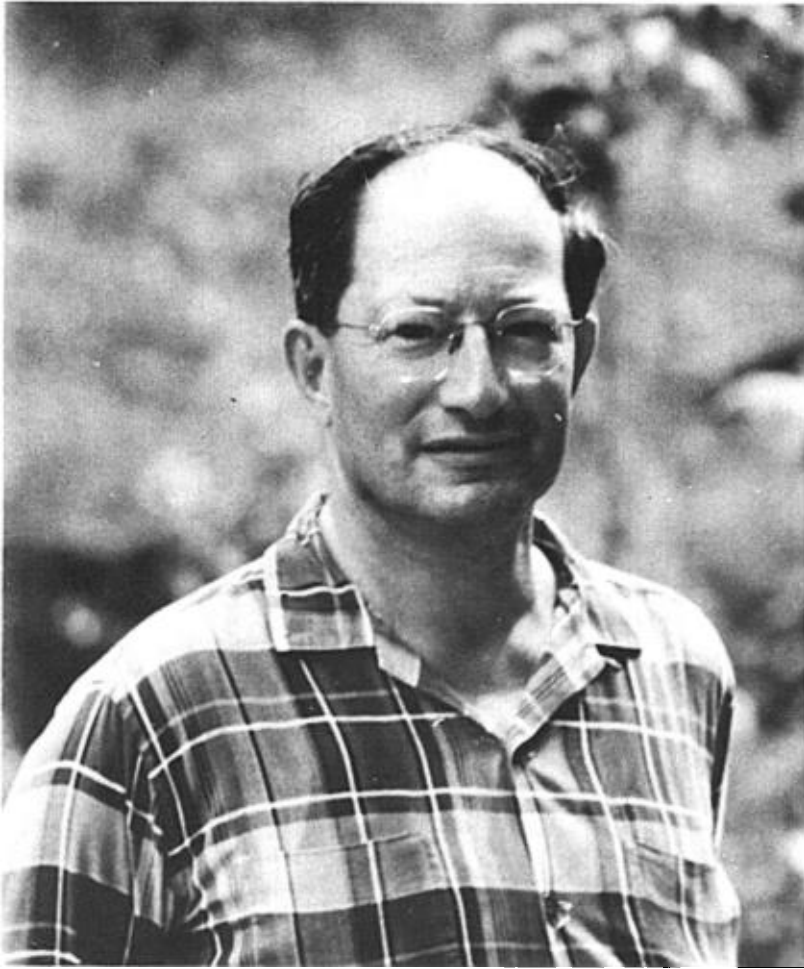
Gregarious by nature, Eugene soon became prominent in the Linnaean Society of New York and, later, its President. The Society published one of his more important publications, *The species of Middle American birds*. In those days, Ernst Mayr, Joseph Hickey, and others were injecting a strong dose of scientific vitality into the meetings of the Society. Gene needed little encouragement to follow such leads, and began

to spend more time at the American Museum. Because of his increasing involvement in ornithological circles and his publications, Gene was appointed a Research Associate of the museum in 1957, a position he held until his death.

Dr. Eisenmann—he became that a few years ago when law schools conferred the degree of Doctor of Jurisprudence on their distinguished graduates—could hold his own on any topic—music, politics, or science. If his off-the-cuff remarks had been recorded, they would have been ready to go to press without editing. Although he was such an articulate person, he never resorted to the use of a dictaphone. He typed his manuscripts with one finger, handicapped by the use of only one hand because of a birth defect. His marginal notes were careless scrawls—a nightmare for secretaries!

Gene was never too busy for consultations, often on knotty questions of nomenclature, despite the fact that his desk was piled high with correspondence and two or three manuscripts in various stages of completion. He was appointed a member of the prestigious International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature and sometimes remarked that many nonlawyers were more addicted to circumlocutions and obscurities than lawyers themselves! He usually worked at home till mid-morning, walked over to the Museum, and remained in his office until seven or eight in the evening. Undoubtedly those quiet hours, after the rest of us had departed, were among his most productive.

Eugene Eisenmann was born in Panama and visited that country annually to study the rich birdlife and to touch base with various members of his family. In 1952 the senior author went to Panama with him. It was Bull's introduction to the rich neotropical avifauna and, with an ideal mentor, an experience he will never forget. Gene's fluent Spanish enabled him to help many aspiring bird students from Latin America, both in the field and at the Museum. His influence in ornithology was wider than indicated by his relatively modest bibliography, for his immense file of notes on neo-



EUGENE EISENMANN, 1906–1981

(Barro Colorado Island, 1967)

tropical birds, centered in Panama and radiating north and south therefrom, was always at the disposal of any serious worker. His assistance went far beyond merely supplying notes and comments; he would spend weeks on end going through manuscripts line by line making corrections and suggestions. Such assistance is acknowledged in numerous works on the birds of Middle and South America published in recent years. In Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee's important *Species of South American birds*, for example, Gene's help was so substantial that he was offered junior authorship, but he declined the honor.

It was in the American Ornithologist's Union,

however, that Eugene Eisenmann exerted the greatest influence and had the widest circle of friends. He became a Life Member in 1936, an Elective Member in 1951, a Fellow in 1960, and Vice President from 1967 to 1969. In 1958 and 1959 he was Editor of *The Auk*. Finally, and most importantly, he served as Chairman of the Committee preparing the sixth edition of the *A.O.U. Check-List*, from 1966 until the time of his death. This volume, which will be dedicated to Eisenmann, will be published in time for the Centennial Meeting of the Union in 1983. What a pity that Gene did not live to attend this historic event! The *Check-List*, however, will be a fitting memorial to his incessant la-

bors, and a testimony of his ability to compromise and to bring often strongly divergent viewpoints into a semblance of consensus.

Gene's interest in birds, their biology, evolution, geographical variation, and conservation, went far deeper than any side issues such as names, whether popular or scientific. At meetings he always participated in field trips, and he undertook more extensive fieldwork when possible. This meant not only the annual trips to Panama but also such distant jaunts as to a meeting of the International Council for Bird Preservation in Japan and a Pan-African Ornithological Congress in Kruger Park. His wisdom in matters of finance and legal affairs, plus his dedication to conservation, made him a valued member of the Pan-American Section of the ICBP, of which he was Vice-Chairman at the time of his death.

It was while returning from the excursion to Japan that Gene suffered a heart attack on Midway Island, where he was observing albatrosses in the company of Roger Tory Peterson. He received excellent care at the Naval hospital on the island and was to enjoy another two-score years of undiminished activity, even though some of us worried about the strain imposed by his expanding waistline. Early in 1981 Gene had a second cardiac attack. He seemed to make a good recovery and even ventured all the way to Edmonton to attend the 1981 A.O.U. meeting. Shortly after returning home, however, he was fatally stricken on October 16.

Eugene left a sister Audrey in Panama, a brother Richard in Washington, and a sister Ethel in New York, along with numerous other members of the far-flung but closely knit Eisenmann family and a host of friends, young and old.

Relatives and friends have established a memorial fund in his name. It will be used to enhance the library of the Ornithology Department of The American Museum of Natural History. Last, but not least, a group of his many friends have banded together to produce a memorial volume in *Neotropical Ornithology*—with over 50 contributors so far—to be dedicated to Gene.

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