

IN MEMORIAM: GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

OLIN SEWALL PETTINGILL, JR.

Wayne, Maine 04284 USA

The death of George Miksch Sutton on 7 December 1982 marked the passing of one of our most eminent bird artists as well as a distinguished ornithologist, talented writer, and inspiring teacher.

George Sutton was born in Bethany, Nebraska, on 16 May 1898, the son of Lola Anna Miksch Sutton and Harry Trumbull Sutton. He was named after his paternal grandfather, George Miksch, a Moravian. His mother was an accomplished pianist. His father, a minister-teacher, moved often with his family; consequently George lived during boyhood and early youth in such widely scattered places as Oregon, Illinois, Texas, and West Virginia. In his *Bird student: an autobiography* (1980) he tells how he began drawing birds and how he eventually chose ornithology as a career, ending his story in 1935 when his career was already well established.

To George, at the age of 8 in Nebraska, learning to recognize birds and to name them correctly was becoming "important." Realizing this, his parents gave him Frank M. Chapman's *Bird-Life*, a little book he "quite literally wore out." Before long he was drawing birds. "I couldn't help it, I *had* to draw birds," he told a friend many years later.

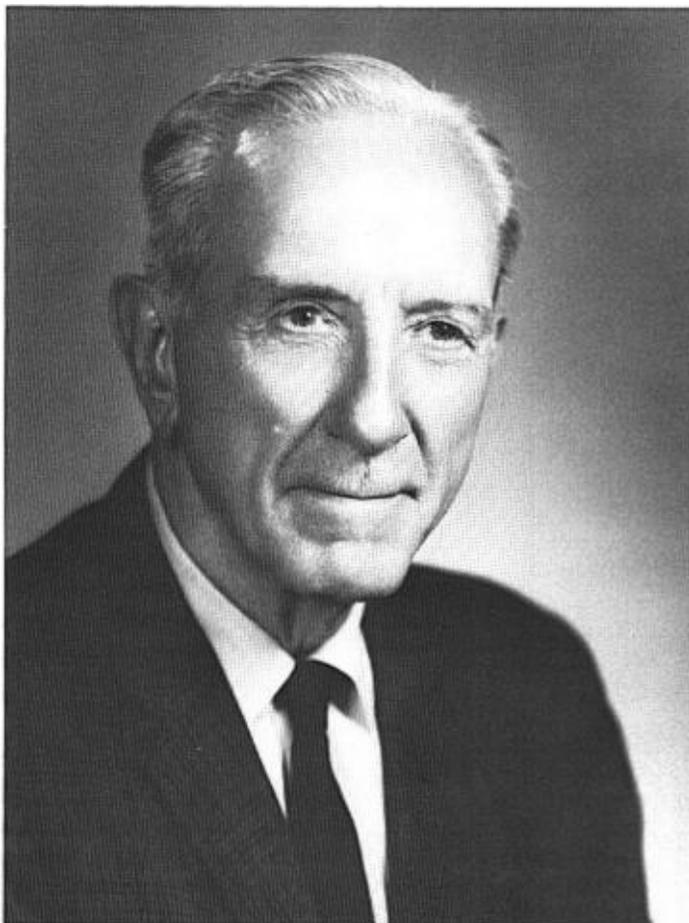
When George was 10 his family lived near the University of Oregon in Eugene, where he came upon Florence Merriam Bailey's *Handbook of birds of the western United States* and in it saw and was deeply impressed by the halftone plates by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. In the university a kindly professor let him arrange the collection of bird skins in systematic order, but not use them. This forced George to make up his own collection. By now he was "drawing birds in earnest."

In 1911, now 13 years of age, he accompanied his family to Texas, where his father had received an offer to teach at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. He attended the preparatory school at the university rather than high school. But his mind was not on class work; it was on the prairie, in his words, "my hunting

ground, my laboratory, my library, my sanctuary. I roamed it, studied it . . ." The birds that delighted him most were Roadrunners. From one nestling, reared at home, George produced on 22 April 1913 a direct-from-life drawing, the first such drawing he ever kept (see plate 1, page 37, in *Bird student*). In April the next year he raised two Roadrunners, taking copious notes on their development.

Hardly had the two birds been raised that spring when the Suttons again moved, this time to Bethany in West Virginia's northern panhandle, where George's father joined the faculty at Bethany College. George took the two Roadrunners with him.

By the time George was 15 he had already broken into print with a short article in the September-October 1913 issue of *Bird-Lore* about rearing a young Roadrunner. Comments on the article from an editor of the magazine stirred him 2 years later to submit another article about his hand-raising two Roadrunners, this time with a watercolor of one of them "in an attitude of fright." Although not direct from life, the drawing was his first ever published (see *Bird-Lore*, January-February, 1915, p. 59). Now almost 17, George felt that he was "arriving at last," and forthwith wrote directly to Fuertes, whom he had worshiped from afar, and asked for help and advice. Fuertes answered promptly and at length, suggesting that George send him drawings for criticism. This response initiated an important relationship that was to endure until Fuertes' tragic death in 1927. At Fuertes's invitation, George spent the summer of 1916 working under his supervision at the family summer home in Sheldrake Springs on Cayuga Lake north of Ithaca, New York. Before George left, Fuertes gave him one of his old paint boxes, which George treasured and took with him on all his expeditions. In the years to follow that fruitful summer, Fuertes took time to write George letters of criticism, encouragement, and inspiration, which George later published in a little book, *To a young bird artist* (1979).



GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON, 1898-1982

After Texas, George found the countryside of West Virginia "vaguely hostile. The steep-sided, wooded hills were self-sufficient, secretive, even haughty . . . The horizon was unbearably close." Yet this did not deter his bird study locally and he soon could prepare "a fairly acceptable bird skin." In the fall of 1914 George entered Bethany College, although his zeal for bird study interfered with his homework. Even so, he enjoyed biology because it gave him a chance to draw.

Visiting the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh with his father, George saw a big door marked Laboratory of Ornithology where "something very important, something truly vital, must be going on." Leaving his father, he pushed open the imposing door and there was W. E. Clyde

Todd, the museum's Curator of Birds, at his desk. George introduced himself, told about his work and interest, and said he would like to be his assistant in the coming summer "no matter how small the salary might be." Mr. Todd, evidently aware of George's writings and sensing his eagerness, agreed to take him on. So in the summer of 1918 George was employed at the museum in charge of the egg collection, re-making bird specimens, and so on.

Back at Bethany College in September for his senior year, campus life was chaotic, with World War I rampant. In uniform, undergoing close-order drills, sleeping in barracks, "I hardly knew where I lived or whether I was really living at all," George recalled. Resenting the militarization, he and several other students,

too outspoken about it, were consequently expelled. Out of uniform, George returned to Pittsburgh in 1919, where he was given full-time employment as Mr. Todd's assistant at the Carnegie Museum.

Mr. Todd, already an authority on the birds of the Labrador Peninsula by virtue of his eight expeditions down the Labrador, invited George to accompany him on his ninth expedition, in the summer of 1920, down the Labrador coast to Port Burwell. This was George's first introduction to the North Country.

By mid-September George was back at the Carnegie Museum. In the spring of 1921 he undertook a special study of a virtually undisturbed wilderness of boggy lakes and cattail marshes in northwestern Pennsylvania known as Pymatuning Swamp. In the winters of 1922-23 he carried out an arrangement with Bethany College whereby, reinstated as a student in absentia, he obtained his B.S. degree. (Years later, in 1952, Bethany College awarded him an Honorary D.Sc.) Meanwhile as opportunity allowed, George produced for Harold H. Bailey's lavishly planned volume *The Birds of Florida* (1925) 76 color plates, all but one showing several species. This was his first undertaking of the sort and as much as he disliked it—crowding species on plates and, worse still, painting birds he had never seen—he needed the money.

Among George's many friends in the Pittsburgh area was John Bonner Semple, munitions inventor-manufacturer and a born sportsman. George readily persuaded him to sponsor and participate personally in ornithological expeditions for the benefit of the Carnegie Museum. There would be many.

In mid-August 1923, Mr. Semple, Mr. Todd, and George journeyed to James Bay to collect Blue Geese—then thought to be a full species rather than a color phase of Snow Geese—for a habitat group in the museum. The following spring, Mr. Semple invited George to spend nearly a month with him in Florida collecting birds, most of which, ironically, he had already painted for the Bailey opus.

Then came a turn of events in George's life, when the Board of Game Commissioners of Pennsylvania urged him to head their Bureau of Research and Information. To make their offer sufficiently attractive, he would be called "state ornithologist." This, coupled with a far

larger salary than he had ever received, was too good to turn down. So he moved to Harrisburg in 1925 and resided there for the next 4 years, except when "borrowed" for two spring-summer Semple expeditions, one in 1926 to the east coasts of James and Hudson Bays, the other in 1928 to the Canadian Labrador.

George was in a sense the mouthpiece for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, informing the public on its work and problems. Besides preparing bulletins and brochures, he traveled widely giving talks, sometimes several a day. Nevertheless, he found time at odd hours, in evenings, on weekends, or on vacations, to prepare 76 color plates for Mr. Todd's *Birds of Western Pennsylvania* (eventually published in 1940), to bring out his first hardback book, *An Introduction to the Birds of Pennsylvania* (1928), to paint his first full-page color plates for *Bird-Lore*, to describe a new genus and species of South American swift, and to write his long report on the birds of Pymatuning Swamp (1928. *Annals Carnegie Museum* 18: 19-239).

Although the Board of Game Commissioners made every effort to keep themselves and their employees out of politics, their struggle was hopeless. Politics was not for George. He wrote: "What I wanted to be, first of all, was not a loyal member of any organization but, rather, an ornithologist knowledgeable enough to draw birds well, write good books, and teach younger people." Thus, in the summer of 1929, George broke away from the Game Commission and registered as a graduate student at Cornell University for a Ph.D. degree under Professor Arthur A. Allen. His thesis would be a report on his year-long exploration of Southampton Island, an arctic outpost at the north end of Hudson Bay, and he set out at once. The experience was to be one of the most soul-satisfying of his life.

Soon after I arrived at Cornell for graduate work in the fall of 1930 George returned from Southampton for his first academic year on the campus. As he and I became close friends, George told me that the eggs of the Harris' Sparrow had never been found because the species nested in far northern situations too early in the spring for ornithologists to reach before the eggs hatched. George knew for certain that the sparrow nested near Churchill, Manitoba, on the west coast of Hudson Bay; we could now reach the nesting grounds by a new

railroad operating to Churchill every week or so the year round. Too good an opportunity to pass up—George insisted that we must go the next spring. By “we” he meant that I should go as photographer. J. B. Semple was excited about the quest; he would go with us and fund it. On 24 May 1931 we arrived at Churchill and were joined by Bert Lloyd as assistant. On 16 June George was the first to find the eggs. George tells the story in a chapter of his *Birds in the Wilderness* (1936). It is a lively one, including the rivalry among us to be the first to find the eggs. This was my first association with George Sutton the field man. For him every waking hour was precious, not to be wasted, and he expected us to take the same attitude. In good weather or bad, if we were not out scouting for birds, finding nests, taking pictures (in my case), collecting specimens (like Mr. Semple, George was a crack shot, rarely missing birds large or small), then we must be inside putting up skins, blowing eggs, and writing our notes and journal of the day.

Back at Cornell in the fall of 1931, George finished his thesis for publication¹ and set to work on *Eskimo Year*, his classic book about wintering with the Southampton Innuit that would be published in 1934. By May, his doctorate obtained, he took off for ornithological expeditions, first with Mr. Todd to Saskatchewan and the Dakotas, then with Mr. Semple for the panhandle of Oklahoma, where, at its western end, George first set foot in the Black Mesa country. Of all the areas he had seen and would study during the rest of his career, this became his favorite. Every time he mentioned it to me his face would light up with a very special expression.

George returned to Cornell in the fall of 1932 as Curator of Birds, a post he would hold for the next 11 years, although he was often away on expeditions and field studies. Two of the expeditions with Mr. Semple were westward to Vancouver Island and the wilds of British Columbia. The other expeditions were southward. Among them was the Cornell University-American Museum of Natural History Expedi-

tion (1935), first to Florida and then to Louisiana. There George sketched from life a nesting pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. On two Semple expeditions to the Big Bend Country in southwest Texas (1933 and 1935), both Mr. Semple and George were tantalized by being so close to Mexico. There it was, beckoning from across the Rio Grande. Inevitably they would go to Mexico, as they did in 1938, with Thomas D. Burleigh as the third member of the expedition. A major result was George's book, *Mexican Birds: First Impressions*, published in 1951. From 1938 on, George was fired up about Mexico and would work in that country with various companions in 1939, 1941, 1947, 1948-49, 1951-52, and 1971.

George's enthusiasm for Mexico was not long in rubbing off on me, now teaching at Carleton College in Minnesota. I was on the lecture circuit of the National Audubon Society and needed a new film. George urged me to go with him to Mexico and make it. He knew just where to base ourselves. The outcome: we organized the Cornell-Carleton Expedition and set off early in 1941, joined by two student assistants. As in Churchill in 1932, George's time was too precious to waste. Rather than collecting specimens himself, his primary objective was to paint life-size portraits from fresh specimens on big sheets of paper (22 × 29 inches). The assistants' job was to collect the specimens and find appropriate plants for perches and/or background. From these George painted day after day, sometimes indoors, more often in shade outside amid circumstances beset by heat, humidity, mosquitoes, and ticks. Some of the marvels from his endurance were beautifully reproduced in his *Portraits of Mexican Birds: Fifty Selected Paintings* (1975). Earlier, in 1972, George published *At a Bend in a Mexican River*, an entertaining book (handsomely illustrated with many of his paintings) about the Cornell-Carleton Expedition and two other expeditions, in 1948-49 and 1951-52.

After the United States entered World War II in 1941, George became emotionally unsettled. No longer was he comfortable in academe when he felt that he could be of use in the conflict, and in 1942 he applied for service. He was commissioned as a Captain in the Army Air Forces and assigned to the Arctic Section of the Arctic, Desert, and Tropic Information Center. Later he was raised to the rank of Major and became Chief of the Arctic Section. For much

¹ The Exploration of Southampton Island, Hudson Bay. *Memoirs Carnegie Museum*, vol. 12; Introduction, p. 1-78, issued 28 March, 1932; *Birds*, 1-275; 31 May 1932; *Mammals* (with W. J. Hamilton, Jr.), 1-111, 4 August 1932.

of the time he was based in either Dayton, Ohio, or Orlando, Florida. George's principal work in the service was directing and coordinating tests for survival under arctic conditions. He was continually frustrated by delays for equipment, intrastaff squabbles, and unpredictable changes in orders from higher commands. To keep his peace of mind he resorted to evenings alone in his room, writing and reworking drafts of his ornithological papers, and on weekends alone or with friends to exploring nearby areas for birds, often acquiring significant information he would later publish. Toward the end of his stint in the service he was sent to Aftu, at the western end of the Aleutians.

As World War II neared its end, George was as anxious to be a civilian again as he once was to be in uniform. He would not return to Cornell but instead in 1947 went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor as Curator of Birds in the Museum of Zoology. Beginning in 1949, he also held an appointment as Associate Professor of Zoology. Before leaving the service, George had contracted undulant fever, and for months in Ann Arbor he was debilitated. The illness, from which he gradually recovered, did not deter him from work in the museum, writing, advising graduate students, and giving close attention to the affairs of the Wilson Ornithological Society.

Without question no other person ever played a greater role in the activities and development of the Wilson Ornithological Society than George Sutton. He first became an active member in 1921, when it was called the Wilson Ornithological Club. For the 1926 cover of *The Wilson Bulletin*, its quarterly, he made a pen-and-ink drawing of a male Wilson's Warbler, used thereafter until 1963 when, for a new cover design that has appeared ever since, he drew two Wilson's Warblers. George served as president of the society in 1942 and 1946-47 and was editor of the *Bulletin* for six numbers (September 1950 through December 1951). Besides these services were his benefactions—numerous life memberships for worthy young people, a grant to initiate the Fuertes Awards for Research, and the very substantial Colorplate Fund to enable publication of a frontispiece in color for each number of the *Bulletin*.

Although settling in Michigan after the war, George was not a newcomer to the state. As early as the summer of 1934 and in occasional summers during the next 14 years, he studied

nesting sparrows and vireos at the Edwin S. George Reserve, near the town of Pinckney. The focus of his studies was on the development of plumages in young birds. His reports were later published by the Cranbrook Institute of Science and the Museum of Zoology; they were especially notable for his direct-from-life paintings in color of numerous species in full juvenal plumage.

In the fall of 1949 I took a semester's leave from Carleton, specifically to work at the Museum of Zoology on my forthcoming guides to bird finding while George prepared the pen-and-ink drawings to illustrate them. After our frequent discussions on just which species should be selected, George sketched them in pencil for my approval. His speed and technique in finally inking the drawings amazed me. In the course of 3 months he turned out 110 drawings, all in his inimitable style of indicating degrees of color intensities without color.

During our association in that busy semester George talked to me about Oklahoma, how Margaret M. Nice was urging him to follow up her revised edition of *The Birds of Oklahoma* (1931) with a larger book of his own, and how he was thinking seriously of doing so. The expedition with J. B. Semple and two others across the state in 1937 had familiarized him with much of its bird life. Occasionally George remarked that he hoped to live in Oklahoma, but he never intimated where or when. In 1951 he was invited to teach an ornithology course at the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, on Lake Texoma. Then came an invitation in 1952 to join the faculty as Professor of Zoology at the University of Oklahoma in Norman.

George was never happier than when in Oklahoma. Here he was in so much open country—prairie country—that he had loved from his boyhood, and in a dynamic university whose zoology staff, well aware of his reputation and talents, welcomed him with open arms. Jointly with his professorship he held the position of Curator of Birds in the University's Stovall Museum of Science and History. Later he was appointed Research Professor of Zoology, lightening his teaching load and allowing him more time for his projects and writing. He retired as the George Lynn Cross Research Professor Emeritus in 1968, but this did not mean that he had really retired.

Even though Oklahoma was where George

wanted to be, the North Country never lost its pull on him. In 1953 he could not resist responding and returned to Hudson Bay, headquartering at a Hudson's Bay Company post to paint birds for Mr. Todd's monumental *Birds of the Labrador Peninsula*, in preparation for nearly a half century and ultimately published in 1963.

My wife and I, deciding that we should go to Iceland in the summer of 1958 for filming, prevailed upon George to accompany us. He would be free to paint birds, including certain downy young shorebirds that had so far eluded him. Many an hour we spent searching for, chasing, and capturing his lively quarry. Afterwards in our paneled truck or in a hotel room, George put the chicks on a temporarily fenced tabletop and waited patiently until his subjects quieted down enough for the attitudes he wanted. But shorebirding was only a small part of our experiences in our 2 months. These he described vividly and enjoyably in *Iceland Summer: Adventures of a Bird Painter* (1961), a book that earned him the John Burroughs Medal for excellence in nature writing.

George's last excursions to the North Country were again to the Far North, this time with David Parmelee, to Victoria Island in 1962 and Jenny Lind Island in 1966. Finally, in 1969, Stewart D. MacDonald of the National Museums of Canada and Parmelee invited George to go with them and others to the truly far northern islands of Cornwallis, Bathurst, and Ellesmere. *High Arctic* (1971) is George's accounting of their eventful exploits, embellished with 11 of his watercolors, several predominantly landscapes with birds or mammals in them, unlike anything he had ever painted.

Soon after I became Director of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University in 1960, I lured George back to the Cornell fold to the extent of having him as a member of the Administrative Board (1968-74). He contributed two covers in color as well as several articles with his drawings (some in color) to the Laboratory's annual, *The Living Bird*.

George's 674-page book, *Oklahoma Birds*, published in 1967, marked the culmination of years of investigations by him and many others in the state. Ten years later he published *Fifty Common Birds of Oklahoma*, an attractive little book with each species painted in color opposite a page of relevant text. In 1968 he started and continued to oversee the *Bulletin of the*

Oklahoma Ornithological Society, a quarterly of exceptionally high quality in editing and substance.

Those of us who were fortunate to work with George collecting birds never ceased to be envious of his dexterity and speed in preparing skins. None of us could rival him. Small passerine birds in good condition to begin with he could skin out, insert the materials to recreate the shape, and sew up in 15-20 minutes, with every feather in place. During his career he personally prepared many thousands of skins, including roughly 6,000 in the Stovall Museum, 7,700 in the Delaware Museum of Natural History in Wilmington, and 3,800 in the Carnegie Museum. One has only to see any of the skins in their trays to spot them as George Sutton's.

George was a prolific writer. Besides his dozen books, he wrote articles in magazines, contributed chapters to anthologies, and published about 250 ornithological papers and notes. Although the excellence of his writing is legendary, let nobody believe that it was achieved easily. Practically everything he wrote went through two or more drafts in longhand; then it was typed and copies sent to persons qualified to check on it for accuracy, for overlooked points, or for suggestions to improve the text. Once the final copy was typed, he usually set it aside to read and read again later just to be sure it satisfied him.

Throughout most of his life, except for the temporary setback with undulant fever, George enjoyed robust health and great physical strength as well as boundless energy. In 1962, while putting out a fire in the Stovall Museum's bird range that was caused by the accidental ignition of carbon bisulphide, George inhaled poisonous fumes that permanently damaged his lungs. Thereafter he became short of breath when climbing stairs or otherwise exerting himself. Still, he continued active in the field until 1979 when a combination of progressively serious ailments confined him to his home and office, where he continued to write and keep up with correspondence. Not until 4 weeks before his death did he go into a nursing home. Even there he worked briefly on a book and, just 5 days before he died, signed a contract for its publication.

George wished to have his ashes scattered in his beloved Black Mesa Country. Many of his

close friends in Oklahoma and elsewhere consequently gathered on 18 June 1983 at the Black Mesa proper to carry out his wish and at the same time express their love and deep respect by relating personal experiences they had shared with him.

In his later life George was the recipient of many honors, among them the Arthur A. Allen Award of Cornell University, for his distinguished contributions to ornithology; the Knight Cross of the Order of the Falcon by the government of Iceland; Honorary Director of the Oklahoma Zoological Society; induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame; and the Distinguished Service Citation of the University of Oklahoma, the highest honor that institution can confer.

If there is one word that truly speaks for the greatest personal quality of George Sutton it is generosity. Possibly it was instilled by Fuytes, who was so generous to him, and George followed with generosity toward others for the rest of his life. To aspiring young bird artists he gave endless encouragement with pertinent suggestions for improving their technique. Seven bird artists who are prominent today ex-

pressed their indebtedness to George Sutton for his role in enhancing their work (see *American Birds*, March–April, 1983) and their evaluation of his eminence in the art of bird portrayal. As a teacher at the University of Oklahoma his office door was always open to students. Involved as he was with countless projects, he had time to give students his advice on their particular problems. He delighted at every opportunity to take his students into the field. To his home he frequently invited both his students and their families for purely social occasions. How many hundreds of ornithologists he helped personally and inspired intellectually, there is no way of knowing. Certainly no other person enriched my professional life as much as George Sutton.

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