



RODOLPHE MEYER DE SCHAUENSEE, 1901-1984

IN MEMORIAM: RODOLPHE MEYER DE SCHAUENSEE

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Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee, a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, died on 24 April 1984 at the age of 83. For nearly 50 years he was curator of birds at The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and he served the institution as vice president from 1940 to 1949 and as a Board member from 1934 until his death. In addition, he was on the Board of the Philadelphia Zoological Society and included among his many professional activities memberships in the British Ornithologists' Union, the Société Ornithologique de France, and the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, as well as honorary membership in the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata. During his associ-

ation with the Academy, Meyer de Schauensee greatly expanded the Ornithology Department's collection of bird skins, making it one of the best general collections in the country and the foremost repository of Andean material in the world. His impressive legacy to ornithology includes over 100 publications and 6 major books on avian systematics. In recognition of his important contributions to the study of South American birds, Meyer de Schauensee was awarded the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1977 and the medal of the Congreso Iberoamericano de Ornitología in 1983.

Rodolphe was born in Rome on 4 January

1901, one of two sons of Frederick Meyer de Schauensee and his wife, the former Matilda Toland. Rodolphe's father was a Swiss Baron, and the family owned a chateau near Lucerne, "Schloss Schauensee," where Rodolphe spent several summers. Schooled first in Rome and Florence, Italy, where he lived as a young boy, he moved to the United States in 1913 and attended the Hoosac School in New York. Rodolphe's mother was a Philadelphian, and thus it was natural that in the 1920's he should come to live at Wynnewood, northwest of Philadelphia.

As a young man, Rodolphe developed a keen interest in birds and maintained an aviary of tropical species at his mother's Wynnewood house. This early interest in natural history brought him into a close, life-long association with The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. There he met James Bond, also a member of the Academy's staff, and the two became close friends, collaborating in the field and at home on their studies in neotropical ornithology.

At about this time in the early 1930's, I remember telephoning Rodolphe for advice on where to obtain a Blossom-headed Parakeet. This conversation marked the beginning of a life-long friendship. It was not until October of 1936, however, that I actually met Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee. On this memorable occasion, he took me to meet his charming wife, the former Williamina W. Wentz. The Meyer de Schauensees had twin daughters, Maude and Maxine, and the family lived on a lovely estate in Devon, Pennsylvania, which remained Rodolphe's primary residence for the rest of his life.

The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia was a very different place before the arrival of Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee. Most American museums and ornithologists in those pre-World War II days tended to share a predilection for our native fauna. Fortunately, Rodolphe's enthusiasm for the tropics managed to influence the Academy, and his extensive foreign collecting more than made up for the previous neglect of exotic birds. During his 50 years with the Academy, the collection grew from about 80,000 to over 170,000 skins; this increase is even more impressive when one considers that it took 110 years—from 1815 to 1926—to acquire the first 80,000. Particularly outstanding during Rodolphe's time were the

collections from western China, Thailand, Kenya, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

Rodolphe, often accompanied by his wife, undertook extensive collecting trips in Brazil, Thailand, Burma, southern Africa, the East Indies, and Guatemala. He made his first expedition for the Academy in 1926. Together with James Bond, he explored the region of Brazil around the mouth of the Amazon, near Belém. They obtained many live animals, including birds and snakes, as well as over 500 bird skins for the Academy's collections.

Following this Amazonian trip, he made three expeditions to Thailand (1928, 1929, and 1933), the last of which included a visit to the Southern Shan States, now Burma. Thailand was one of Rodolphe's favorite countries, as it supported a rich and varied avifauna. It was there, during one of his expeditions, that he met young Herbert Deignan and encouraged the recent Princeton graduate, who was teaching at a school in Chiang Mai, to enter ornithology. During his third expedition to Thailand, the Meyer de Schauensees trained a staff of native collectors who continued to work for them over the next five years, traveling into remote corners of the country in search of birds and other animals. Eventually this field staff collected about 7,500 specimens, which were presented to the Academy. However, not *all* the specimens collected in Thailand by Meyer de Schauensee and his staff made it to the Academy. A note in the back of one field journal recounts the fate of a shipment of preserved fish specimens: when the barrels containing the specimens arrived in New York Harbor, the stevedores apparently drank the alcoholic preserving fluid after first dumping the fish into the bay.

In 1930, a group composed of Rodolphe, his wife, Reginald Allen, and Wharton Sinkler made an expedition to South West Africa and the Kalahari Desert, where they collected 560 specimens. Rodolphe's last major expedition was made in 1935 when he and Mrs. Meyer de Schauensee explored Guatemala and brought back 415 skins for the Academy's collections.

In addition to going into the field himself, Rodolphe sponsored many expeditions and collecting trips for friends and associates. One such was the 1937-1938 Denison-Crockett expedition to the South Pacific, which he underwrote anonymously and on which I was enlisted as a zoologist. Rodolphe came to the dock

in Philadelphia to see us off. Just before we boarded the schooner yacht 'Chiva,' he thrust a book into my hand, saying "Take this, Dillon. It is current reading on where you're going." The volume was A. R. Wallace's "The Malay Archipelago," first published in 1869. His prophesy proved correct. Months later, when I was exploring the north coast of New Guinea, I visited a fig tree mentioned by that famous explorer and evolutionary theorist; there I saw Fig Parrots feeding on the fruit, just as Wallace had described them nearly 100 years earlier.

Rodolphe was a prolific writer, and his publications, essentially systematic in nature, were numerous and comprehensive. Following his expeditions, in a series of scientific papers, he described many new bird forms from tropical America as well as the new genus (*Namibornis*) from Angola. Later in life he devoted himself to writing six books, which he considered his most significant contribution to ornithology: "The Birds of the Republic of Colombia" (1948-1952); "The Birds of Colombia" (1964); "The Species of Birds of South America" (1966); "A Guide to the Birds of South America" (1970), widely acclaimed as his most important book; "A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela" (1978), which he wrote with William H. Phelps, Jr.; and, finally, "The Birds of China" (1984), published by the Smithsonian Institution Press just two weeks before his death. Interestingly, he visited very few of the countries whose birds he described. His work instead was based on the Academy's extensive collection of skins. Rodolphe had a more comprehensive knowledge of the distribution of the birds of the world than anybody else in this country, with the possible exception of Jean Delacour. He also

had an extraordinary ability to recall the historic literature in several languages, for he spoke Italian, French, and Portuguese as well as English. He translated Count Salvadori's "Birds of Borneo" for me with the greatest of ease.

Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee was a fascinating man of many interests. Rodolphe's extraordinary, wide-ranging interest in nature and collecting never waned during the 50 years I knew him. I recall coming from New York or Harvard to visit him when I was a student. At midday we would leave off looking at birds and proceed to the Philadelphia Club for luncheon, where he would often exercise his skill as a champion backgammon player. He was a perfect mentor—I enjoyed him extravagantly and count him among the three or four ornithologists who were most influential in determining the course of my life. Yet he was a private and retiring person, choosing to avoid publicity even within the confines of the Academy. And so it was that, at his request, no services were held to mark the passing of this great man, one of the last of the gentleman ornithologists.

His loss is a considerable one to his friends, to the Academy, and to ornithology. He will be remembered as a warm and generous man, supportive both of his colleagues and the Academy, unfailingly kind and courteous to all who worked for or with him; his charm and enthusiasm never left him, not even during the illness that troubled his later years. His fine ornithological library, willed to the Academy upon his death, will be a wonderfully appropriate memorial to this energetic, enthusiastic, and most friendly of ornithologists.