OLIVE THORNE MILLER

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

WITH PHOTO

ONCE AGAIN California is called upon to mourn the loss of one of a noted circle of popular bird writers from the east who found within her gates, amid her myriad birds and flowers, rare satisfaction and ministration for their declining years. Bradford Torrey, whose last days were spent in Santa Barbara, died on October 7, 1912, at the age of sixty-nine, leaving eleven bird books; and Mrs. Harriet Mann Miller, better known by her pen name of Olive Thorne Miller, whose last years were spent in Los Angeles, died on December 26, 1918, at the ripe age of eighty-seven, also leaving eleven bird books as her contribution to bird lore. Both were members of the American Ornithologists' Union, Mrs. Miller having joined in 1887 and been made a Member, as Mr. Torrey was, when the class of Members was established in 1901. To those familiar with the writings of these two there is still further parallelism, for in their books we find much the same leisurely literary quality, the charm of humor, and the pervading vital interest in the birds whose ways they are portraying.

But while Mr. Torrey was well satisfied to accept the Rambler's Lease, and in his delightful discursive essays, such as those in Nature's Invitation and Field Days in California, man and bird figure with equal interest, Mrs. Miller's greatest happiness was to find the one bird she had perhaps traveled hundreds of miles to see, and hour after hour, day after day, and week after week, by patient, tireless study, note-book in hand, master the secret of that bird's home life. As she wrote, prefacing her chapters on the Kingbird's Nest and Three Little Kings, which represented nearly two months of field work, "However familiar the bird, unless the student has watched its ways during the only domestic period of its life—nesting time—he has still something to learn. In fact he has almost everything to learn, for into those two weeks is crowded a whole life-time of emotions and experiences which fully bring out the individuality of the bird. . . . Moreover, to the devotee of the science that someone has aptly called Ornithography, nothing is so attractive. What hopes it holds out! Who can guess what mysteries shall be disclosed, what interesting episodes of life shall be seen around that charmed spot?"

For twenty years she spent from one to three months in the country watching birds, visiting various parts of New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Ohio, Michigan, Utah, Colorado, and California; accumulating the material which appeared in With the Birds in Maine, Upon the Tree Tops, True Bird Stories from My Note Books, In Nesting Time, Little Brothers of the Air, and A Bird Lover in the West. In New York and Utah I was with her and found that her one thought was to make an exhaustive study of birds unconscious of observation, a method which gave peculiar value to her work. To me, at that time, birds were companions from whom I wanted some response, but when I answered their calls and tried to get them to talk to me in her presence, I felt rebuked; she would never intrude upon them in that

way. The only time that I ever saw her willingly show herself to a bird was when she heard a Veery Thrush give its cry of alarm. She was seated in a comfortable piazza rocking chair at the moment, but sprang up and waded ankle deep through the soft plowed ground of a wide field between the house and the woods to go to its rescue.

Ordinarily when we went to the woods, she would steal in through the bushes in her leaf-colored gown, open her camp-stool cautiously at the foot of a tree whose dark trunk would help conceal her, pull down a branch before her and, with note-book ready, carefully raise her opera-glass and focus it upon the nest she wanted to study. And there she would sit in silence, stoically defy-

Fig. 18. OLIVE THORNE MILLER.

ing tormenting gnats and mosquitoes, patiently waiting and watching to see what might befall.

Alert, keen-eyed, and conscientious to the flit of a wing, she kept a firm rein upon herself, never letting her imagination run away with her, allowing herself to generalize, or attribute her own thoughts and feelings to the bird she was watching; conscientiously writing up her field notes in detail every day, preparatory to putting them in final form for publication during the months following each field season. Scrupulously truthful and enthusiastically in earnest, she was indeed an ideal reporter of bird ways. If all observers had her spirit and devotion, what could we not hope for in addition to our knowledge of little known life histories!

In the summer of 1891, Mrs. Miller, at my solicitation, went up to Locust Grove, New York, to study the Hermit Thrush on his breeding grounds in my home woods. Board was secured for her in the only farmhouse near the woods, but when I found her in her cramped bare white-washed room with her box of books standing in the middle of the floor because there was no other place for it, I was filled with misgivings, not lessened by the memory of the luncheon in a fashionable New York woman's club to which she had taken me a few weeks before. I soon knew her better, however. With a table for her books and her indispensable rocking chair to write in, she became enthusiastic about her room, for through a closed blind she could watch the unsuspecting birds promenading up and down the fence and feeding in the bushes outside. Her books surprised me. They were all either on birds or nature, ranging from Coues' *Key* and the latest good bird books—she said she would like to have a new one every week—to the nature poems of Emerson, Sill, and Sidney Lanier. Twenty-four years later she wrote "That summer at your old home is a lasting source of pleasant memories to me. I can recall the road through that delightful woods almost *foot by foot* with charming details all the way, from the Thrushes' nest near the entrance to the Cuckoo's nest near the exit, and all the delights between." To me the summer, as the one spent with her in Utah in 1892, is rich in cherished memories, for Mrs. Miller was the most delightful of field companions. No beauty of forest or meadow, sky, cloud, or mountain escaped her, and she loved birds as she did nature. When, fresh from college, I saw her first, her hair was nearly white, but the discrepancy in our ages never seemed to occur to me, for she had the spirit and enthusiasm of youth, and we worked side by side as sisters.

The familiar question, how did she come to be interested in birds, is easily answered superficially, though no one can say how much responsibility the old revolutionary Mann ancestor of Bunker Hill fame had in the bend of the twig. While her first bird book was not written until 1885, as a mother of four children she had learned the educational value of true stories and especially of nature tales and had previously published several juvenile books dealing with birds and animals—Little Folks in Feathers and Fur being perhaps one of the best known. Then, her children being grown, and her time at her disposal, a fortuitous circumstance gave a new angle to her nature interest. An old friend from Chicago, the twenty-year home of her married life, Mrs. Sara Hubbard, a pioneer bird worker, came to visit her in her Brooklyn home, and together they went to Prospect Park, then as now rich in birds, and she caught the enthusiasm which lasted throughout her remaining years, inducing her to lecture, and to give bird classes as well as to write a half shelf full of bird books.

In her field work, special birds had a peculiar attraction for her, among them the Solitaire and the Phainopepla. "How I envy you the music of the Solitaire!" she wrote me in answer to a letter from its breeding grounds. "It is the most wonderful song in the world, I think." And when after visiting her married son in California, she was about returning to Brooklyn, she wrote that if she could find the Solitaire in Colorado she would give up her overland ticket and perhaps spend the rest of the summer studying him.

The Phainopepla was the burden of her song for years, associated as it was with her thoughts of California, which was her Mecca long before she was able to make it her home. "I am suffering from my old malady, California fever," she wrote me. And from Bailey Island, Maine, in 1902—"You see I

am back in my old haunts again, but I have left my heart, or a large part of it, in southern California. I could not bear to come away! I shall *never* be satisfied till I go back, and I want to *stay*. I don't know exactly what was the overpowering fascination for me, but it was there. . . . There is a most delightful place, full of Phainopeplas and other birds, in Pasadena, The Arroya; I got a family on The Arroya Drive to take me to board, a carpenter's family, and I had a simply glorious time there." A previous letter written twenty-four hours after her arrival in Pasadena tells its enthusiastic story. "My dear, he was the *first* bird to greet me! He came onto a beautiful pepper tree in front of my window and called a husky sort of imitation of the red-wings' 'o-ka-lee.' I was delighted of course, and I have spent this morning watching a pair. . . . Of course I am talking about the Phainopepla, the only bird for me just now. The place is in Pasadena, but has plenty of ground and overlooks a valley where birds abound. There's a beautiful chain of mountains across the back. It is simply glorious! And I am as wild over the flowers as over the birds. I reached here yesterday and I have stayed in the house only long enough to eat and sleep. . . . I hope you are used to rhapsodies. . . . I got too full and had to write to one who knows."

Some years after the death of her husband, Mr. Watts Todd Miller, a New Yorker like herself, and the marriage of her oldest son and daughter, the day finally came when her hopes and longings were realized and she was able to go back to California to live; and it was on the bank of that same Arroya "full of Phainopeplas and other birds" that her daughter, Mary Mann Miller, also a lover of birds, built the cottage suggestively called El Nido, half hidden by its vines and trees and flowers, which was to shelter her for the rest of her life.

By this time, Mrs. Miller had already far exceeded the allotted span of three-score-years-and-ten, but two more bird books, The Bird our Brother, and The Children's Book of Birds, and some half dozen of her delightful juvenile books, written now from both the mother's and grandmother's points of view, came from the ever-ready pen of the indefatigable worker; making in all twenty-four books and a bird booklet, published mainly by the Houghton Mifflin Company and E. P. Dutton, in addition to about seven hundred and eighty articles published in various papers and magazines.

One of her earlier books, The Woman's Club, was written when she was devoting much of her winter time to club work in Brooklyn and New York, and shows the same earnest purpose that underlay all her work; for she felt that to women denied college training the woman's club afforded not only a means of intellectual development but a help to a broader, wiser living. In her bird work, in the same way, she was inspired by a reverent belief in the uplifting, ennobling influence of nature.

When from failing eyesight she was forced to give up her work, her keenly active mind was fed from books read aloud in the family circle—always one of her greatest pleasures—and she still had the joy of being in her beloved land of sunshine and flowers, or as she most often referred to it in her letters, "the Land of Heart's Desire". Even then, in one of her last letters, there was a touch of the old enthusiasm for birds, for in the summer a Screech Owl, as she wrote "an innocent little Screech Owl who doesn't screech but utters a gentle call which I love to hear," took up his residence in the eucalyptus trees near El Nido. "Ah, if only I had eyes to watch him! I never had such a

chance," she exclaimed, for to her, her old work would always be, as she expressed it, "the most delightful work in the world—studying bird life."

Washington, D. C., January 27, 1919.

BIRD RECORDS FROM THE SACRAMENTO VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

By ALEXANDER WETMORE

FOR MOST of the period between August 17 and October 17, 1918, I was occupied in field work in the Sacramento Valley, California, between Marysville, Maxwell and Tehama, and, though not engaged primarily in the collecting of specimens, had daily opportunity for observation of birds. Considerable areas in this region are now utilized for the culture of rice, and the heavy irrigation necessary for this crop has made a condition favorable to water haunting birds over considerable tracts that formerly were entirely dry during the summer months. Small fishes brought down in the large irrigation canals were abundant in the flooded rice fields, and attracted many Great Blue Herons, Terns, Kingfishers and others, while water boatmen and aquatic insects of similar habit drew other smaller birds. The following brief notes of occurrence are those that seem unusual or of interest. For general information on the occurrence or range of birds in this area I have referred to J. Grinnell's list of California birds (Pacific Coast Avifauna, no. 11, 1915).

Dendrocygna bicolor. Fulvous Tree-Duck. A flock of 18 observed October 12 on the property of the Sacramento Outing Club, west of Live Oak.

Sterna caspia. Caspian Tern. Individuals of this species were observed near Maxwell on August 21, and September 6, 7 and 8. On September 7 a bird, in juvenal plumage, that was resting on a levee near a road, allowed me to approach within fifteen feet without becoming alarmed. Later I heard it giving the high-pitched whistled call characteristic of young individuals of this species, a note entirely different from the harsh, raucous screams of adults.

Ixobrychus exilis exilis. Least Bittern. One was flushed from a growth of cattails in a rice field near Butte Creek, west of Gridley, on September 14.

Herodias egretta. American Egret. This species was of common occurrence in suitable localities in the rice fields and adjacent flooded areas. These herons were observed first near Maxwell on August 18. On the following day seven were seen in one flock and four in another, while solitary individuals were observed elsewhere. A flock of seven frequented one area here for two weeks. Near Butte Creek, west of Gridley, fifty were seen in one place scattered about over a rice field or in pools of water near by, the clear white of their plumage standing out in pleasing contrast against the green of the grain. Near Maxwell thirty were observed in one flock on September 8. Others were seen on Butte Creek, west of Live Oak, on September 10, and farther north in the same region, on September 15 and 17. From this time on they were less numerous. Two were noted near Maxwell on September 25, and two others seen in the same region on September 29 were the last that were observed. It would seem from these records that the Egret is increasing in number in this region. E. D. Ricketts, State Deputy Game Warden, stated that white herons breed in a rookery on the Butte Creek sloughs, so that it seems possible that these may be Egrets. Adult birds were observed on several occasions, on extensive mudflats, driving immature individuals about, harrying them with vicous thrusts of their bills, and harsh squawks, as these herons do when they have abandoned their young to their own resources in securing food: an observation, however, of uncertain value as an indication that these young had been reared in the vicinity, as all were fully grown and strong on the wing.