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JOHN EUGENE LAW—A BIOGRAPHY

WITH PORTRAIT

By JOSEPH GRINNELL

John Eugene Law, son of John and Katherine E. Law, was born August 26, 1877, in Forest City, Iowa, and lived there until the age of 14. He attended high school in Perry, Iowa, 1892 to 1896; then he spent two years at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, going from there to Stanford University, California, where he received his A. B. in 1900. From 1900 to 1903 he was teller in the First National Bank of Pomona, California, from 1903 to 1911, cashier in the First National Bank of Hollywood, and from 1911 to 1914, president both of the First National Bank of Hollywood and of the Hollywood Savings Bank. In 1914 he retired from active business. After prolonged illness, his death occurred in Glendale, California, November 14, 1931, thus early in the 55th year of his age.

J. Eugene Law as a factor in western ornithology is the prime theme of this biography. For this is the rôle in which we of the Cooper Ornithological Club came to know him best—came to place high value upon his attainments and influence.

My own acquaintance with the subject of this biography began in 1897 when I received in Pasadena a postal card inquiry from "J. Eugene Law, 421 Lake, Madison, Wisc.", dated February 26, for skins of juncos and marsh sparrows. Negotiations proceeded, and I sold him 6 Thurber Juncos at 20 cents each and 6 Belding Marsh Sparrows at 35 cents each; and I received for them a Money Order for \$3.30. Those very skins are still in the Law collection.

I first met Gene Law in person, in 1900 at Stanford University. We had two or three brief conversations about birds, but our interests otherwise were far apart, he having majored in law, while I was a graduate student in the department of zoology. We exchanged a few letters in 1902 and 1903, chiefly concerning Cooper Club affairs. By 1904, when he was well established in banking in Hollywood, and I in teaching at Throop Polytechnic Institute in Pasadena, correspondence and visits became frequent, our common interests being the collecting and study of birds and the promotion of the welfare of the Cooper Ornithological Club.

It was in his vigorous activities in the interests of the Cooper Club that Law rendered valuable aid to the spread of bird study in southern California. An indication of this is obtainable from the record of the offices he held, as follows: President of the Southern Division, 1905 and 1913 to 1915; vice-president, 1916 to 1917;

secretary, 1906 to 1912; business manager, 1907 to 1925; president, board of governors, 1925. He became a member of the Club in 1900, a life member in 1915, and was elected to honorary membership in 1929. In connection with this latter, highest tribute his associates in the Club could give him, the following sentences were included in the formal proposal which was filed with both the Northern and the Southern Division.

"In event of favorable action upon our proposal, we believe that the Club will thereby confer lasting recognition upon Mr. Law for the many years of loyal service that he has unselfishly given to the Club. Furthermore, in the interests of scientific ornithology, Mr. Law deserves the recognition by reason of the high standards of accuracy always shown by his published articles, as also because of his important contributions to methodology in the fields of bird banding and plumage study. On the other hand, by favorable action upon this proposal, the Club itself will gain by the addition of a worthy name to its Honorary Membership, already of distinguished constitution." His election carried unanimously in the Southern Division on March 26, 1929, in the Northern Division on March 28, 1929. Letters from him shortly afterward indicated his profound appreciation of the good will and esteem of his fellows thus expressed.

Referring again to his devotion to the interests of the Cooper Club, it was Gene Law who, in 1921, entirely revised the Constitution under which the Club is now governed. This was when he was in residence in Berkeley, so that I had opportunity of seeing with what extreme care he considered every detail, exercising scrutiny from the standpoint of a business man and a lawyer, but at the same time heeding the prime purposes for which the Club was founded.

It was Gene Law, too, who introduced the idea of an Annual Meeting of the Cooper Club, similar in purpose to that of the A.O.U. He pointed out the impossibility of many of the western members ever getting East to the A.O.U. meetings, and he thought that by having a similar annual meeting here in the West, with formal presentation of papers, serious bird study would be furthered and the divisions of the Cooper Club would be brought more closely together. These ideas went out in the shape of a questionnaire to each member of the Board of Governors, in January, 1925. The plan was adopted, and the seven consecutive Annual Meetings of the Club have proven by their brilliant success the wisdom of the original proposal.

As early as 1897 Gene Law had become a collector. Throughout the subsequent years he continued to add to his privately owned collections relating especially to ornithology. He took vast pains in preparing and caring for the scientific specimens he collected. His bird-skins, feather-mounts, skeletons, eggs, labels, notebooks, catalogs, were all given the most careful attention, to make them permanent, neat, and accurate in all respects. His business training demonstrated its worth when it came to organizing the bird-banding data gathered by himself and Mrs. Law, and that which in later years went through his hands from other sources in quantity. Whatever he did was done well and with attention to niceties of detail that are attained by only a very few. In all these labors he received the ever sympathetic assistance of his capable wife, Laura Beatty Law. The two worked continually together, in field and laboratory, throughout the period of Gene's main scientific activity.

It was in 1919 that J. Eugene Law became connected with the California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology; and from then on, his curatorial acumen contributed not inconsiderably to the development of the "system" that characterizes that museum's methods of housing its materials. He served first as Curator in Osteology and latterly, up to the time of his death, as Curator in Ptilology. Although on



Fig. 20. JOHN EUGENE LAW, 1877-1931.

"dollar-a-year" basis, he contributed of his time and energy generously. He was in residence in Berkeley from time to time, but to far less extent than he had originally intended, because considerations of health made it increasingly the wisest course for him to reside in the south. The periods when he was present in the old M. V. Z. building on the University of California campus will ever be remembered by his older associates there for their pleasant social features. Then, too, the active participation of Mr. Law in the meetings of the Northern Division, C. O. C., by reading papers based upon his personal studies, and by engaging in the open discussions, marked a profitable and enjoyable era in that Division's history.

While, as I have emphasized, Law's direct contributions to published ornithology are altogether worthy as to originality and soundness of thought, the bulk of them would have been far greater had he not expended his energies so generously in other directions. The extent of the services that he gave to ornithology through the effective encouragement of others, and by accepting more than his share of the organization drudgery in the Cooper Ornithological Club and the Western Bird-banding Association, can hardly be comprehended save by the relatively few of us who happened to be in a position to know of and evaluate these services.

From a few sources through which I knew valuable light would be shed, I have elicited noteworthy testimony. The first of these sources is Mr. E. Lowell Sumner, Jr., who now holds the position of Research Assistant on the staff of the California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. He is also a graduate student in the University of California. The following four paragraphs are direct from Mr. Sumner's own pen.

"Even one's most vivid impressions of a loved and revered personality are difficult to convert into words. This is particularly true of my remembrances of Mr. Law; for the inspiration which I derived from contact with him was of a peculiarly intangible sort. Perhaps the difficulty of translating my impressions arises from the fact that a great part of his influence was traceable to his own general attitude rather than to the material aid which he gave to me. This I can say in spite of having received from him the most generous sort of material help, such as the use of books from his library and the wealth of practical suggestions regarding my work which he contributed at all times.

"Although I had first met Mr. Law at a meeting of the Los Angeles Bird Banding Chapter of the Cooper Ornithological Club in 1924, it was not until the period from 1927 to 1929, while I was in attendance at Pomona College, Claremont, California, that I was privileged to visit him at his home in Altadena with any regularity. During these two years I began more and more to take advantage of his repeated invitations to come over whenever I could; and finally, thanks to the hearty welcome which he never failed to extend, I came to make the thirty mile trip between Claremont and Altadena nearly every week. Once, a fellow disciple, Joseph L. Cobb, and I journeyed out to Tucson, Arizona, in order to meet Mr. Law and his wife and stay for two days with them at one of their favorite camping spots in that interesting country. Once, too, I spent an entire week with the Laws at their Altadena home. Wherever and whenever I saw them they were always the same—generous alike with hospitality and with ideas which opened up new horizons to me.

"In looking back upon those times two characteristics of Mr. Law stand out with especial prominence and explain, in part, the stimulating effect which he had upon those who knew him. One of these was his faculty of seizing upon any incident, no matter how common, which he had chanced to observe in the life of a bird, and investing it with all the mystery and importance which rightfully belonged to it but which from the very familiarity of the incident had been overlooked by others. I

recall his telling me one morning of a Spotted Towhee which he had just been watching as it gathered materials for its nest. How far from the nest site would it go for the materials? Would it travel a long distance in search of certain desired constituents or would it simply take what was nearest and most available? These and a dozen other questions concerning the nest building habits of towhees had occurred to him during the few minutes that he had been watching them; and, as always, his eagerness to find the answers was highly contagious. The vigorous originality of his thought and the emphasis with which he would declare that many of the most fascinating problems of ornithology had not as yet been touched always made me want to start upon three or four of them that very day. 'The field is wide open to you youngsters who are just starting,' he used to say again and again; and then he would proceed to tell of some of the many questions in this wide open field which he himself wanted to investigate but which, he realized already, he would have to leave to those who would come after him.

"The other characteristic to which I refer was his warm personal interest in the problems and aspirations of those who were only beginners in the field of ornithology. He was never so engrossed in his own work that he was not ready at any time to answer their questions or to talk over their plans. Above all, it was, as I have already said, his general attitude which served as a powerful incentive to those who came in contact with him. In my own case, by constantly indicating that he expected important things of me, he made it impossible for me not to do my very best for fear of disappointing him."

Mr. Wright M. Pierce, of Claremont, California, a Governor of the Cooper Ornithological Club, contributes from his recollections the following statements which serve further to illuminate the extent to which Law exerted influence. Under date of February 17, 1932, Mr. Pierce writes me in substance as follows:

"I knew Gene first when he was at Pomona, often going to his home there to see his collections and to make trades. Also I made several short field trips with him. During the time he lived in Altadena I often visited him; it was he who started me in ornithology after I moved to Claremont. . . . He also started my interest in bird banding. . . ."

"I made a trip into Lower California with Gene, early in 1926, I believe. While he was far from a well man then, he held up wonderfully and his mind was as keen as ever even though his body would not let him do all he wished. It was there that we met J. Stuart Rowley, whom we both knew, and his companion, a Mr. Simpson who was with Stewart Edward White in Africa."

Remembering that Law had spoken most warmly of a friendship of his with Dr. Josselyn Van Tyne, of the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, I asked the latter for some reminiscences such as might bear upon the subject of my proposed biography. Dr. Van Tyne promptly furnished the following statements, which again serve admirably to show how effectively Law was able, though doubtless unconsciously, to stimulate and guide the interest of others in the general field of ornithology.

"I first met Eugene Law when I was in California in 1924. There and then began one of the most valued friendships of my life. His was one of the finest minds and most attractive personalities I have ever known. And his friendly counsel and contagious enthusiasm inspired me as no other zoologist has ever done. I shall always be deeply grateful to him for his friendly but nevertheless keen criticism. Nothing was too much trouble for him. His replies to my youthful letters were always written as fully and carefully as though for publication. When I look over the volume of letters he wrote me I feel rather guilty that I should have taken so much of his time

and energy. But I treasure those letters now as my best text of ornithology. Although he was, I suppose, to be rated an amateur in training and position, yet his attitude of mind was truly scientific in rare degree. And particularly I admired that brilliant imagination controlled by sound common sense and scientific caution."

The important ways in which Law contributed to the development of both the technique and the philosophy of bird-banding are fully described by Mr. Harold Michener in a recent article in "News from the Bird-banders" (VII, January, 1932, pp. 1-2 [mimeographed]). I excerpt the paragraphs which seem most pertinent to the present biography from Mr. Michener's account, as follows:

"Soon after Mr. S. Prentiss Baldwin had published some of his results from trapping and banding birds, and the United States Bureau of Biological Survey had undertaken to promote and supervise bird banding throughout the United States, Mr. Law, recognizing the value of that method of studying birds, started it himself and began interesting others in it. By the fall of 1921 he had developed new and improved traps for catching the birds, was displaying them to members of the Southern Division of the Cooper Club, and telling of the interesting results he was getting. At this time he arranged to have space in *The Condor* for the publication of records of birds banded in the west. He collected and edited the material that appeared in this space. Later, beginning with the July, 1923, number of *The Condor*, this section appeared under the designation 'With the Bird Banders' and in it were published not only the reports of birds banded but many notes and articles about bird banding, a review of which brings a realization of the great amount of time and energy Mr. Law put into the promotion of this work.

"In June, 1922, the Southern Division of the Cooper Club, acting upon Mr. Law's recommendation, organized a committee known as the Bird-banding Chapter of the Southern Division of the Cooper Ornithological Club, for the purpose of stimulating interest in the study of birds by the banding method. Mr. Law was appointed chairman of this committee. In this position his influence was always toward the use of banding as a means of serious study of living birds by those qualified to make such studies. He drew about him a considerable group of earnest workers many of whom had not been members of the Cooper Club until he interested them in bird banding. Then in the latter part of 1924 he saw the need of an organization of the bird banders on the western part of the continent similar to the three bird-banding associations that united the banding activities in the eastern and central parts. He provided the motive spirit and did most of the work of preparing for such an association. The Bird-banding Chapter called a meeting on January 11, 1925, for the purpose of organizing the Western Bird-banding Association and Mr. Law was unanimously elected its president, which office he held until the spring of 1926 when in his great desire to devote all his too inadequate strength to his research work he prevailed upon his associates to relieve him of the duties of the presidency. However, the members of the Los Angeles Bird-banding Chapter insisted upon his remaining their president, which office he held until his death.

"It was as president of the Los Angeles Chapter that Mr. Law endeared himself most strongly to the hearts of the banders of that organization and cemented friendships among them which otherwise probably would never have been made. His extensive collection of bird skins, his ornithological library and his knowledge of birds were always freely available to help the banders in their problems. At the monthly meetings he always had something of interest for discussion, often reporting upon some of his own research work.

"Thus it was that from the very first he came to be the guiding spirit, the inspiration, to a degree that can scarcely be exaggerated; and for that group the memory of his generous kindness and his teachings will live on with undiminished strength."

I wish to emphasize a point or two mentioned in Mr. Michener's contribution. Gene Law was a keen critic. He quickly saw the weak places in an article or in a program of activities, such as those that developed in the bird-banding field. And he did not refrain from expressing his views vigorously and to the point. Sometimes these expressions were contrary to dominant current opinion or practice. These qualities are manifest throughout the series of published articles in the *Condor* under the running title "With the Bird Banders." As a result, there is no doubt at all in my mind that very much of Law's own, then new, ideas concerning method and interpretation in this field served quickly to advance the science. Although not acknowledged at the time, because, perhaps, of certain personal reactions, those ideas were, nevertheless, absorbed into the general knowledge of the subject.

A man in the scientific world can leave no more lasting record of his life's activities than in the form of published contributions to his special field of knowledge. The gauge of his accomplishments will not, however, be applied on the basis of total quantity, or of length of the individual articles, but on the basis of soundness of fact and interpretation. In the case of Gene Law, a lasting record of exactly this nature is comprised in the series of articles on published record—all of them, it is interesting to note, in our magazine, the *Condor*—a medium of just such permanent record. For eminent, intrinsic value I will cite certain ones among Gene Law's total of 39 titles as listed in the appended bibliography.

Admirable examples of observational research are recorded in "A feeding habit of the Varied Thrush" (1921a), in "Down-tree progress of *Sitta pygmaea*" (1929a), and in "Another Lewis Woodpecker stores acorns" (1929f). Here we have conscientious, first-hand record of bird behavior, with interpretive analysis brought in, in cautious measure. Pterylosis and the subject of molt are dealt with importantly in articles included in the department "With the bird banders" (1925, pp. 121-123) and under the title "The spring molt in *Zonotrichia*" (1929d). Philosophic discussion, based upon accumulated data and following exhaustive study of the literature, dealt with "The function of the oil-gland" (1929b), "The rôle of the runt: a taxonomic problem" (1929c), and "An orangeless mutant of the Varied Thrush and its bearing on sex color-differences" (1931). This last published article of Gene Law's illustrates in particular a notable characteristic of his, namely, an impelling appetite to run down all possible bearings of the observed facts, not to be satisfied with a partial or hasty explanation. Very many of us workers in the ornithological field would do better than we have in the past, if we would cultivate this same characteristic.

I have personal knowledge that Gene Law left a number of articles altogether unpublished, on his "docket" already for years, simply because he did not consider them yet to come up to his ideals. He would pass an article to print only when he could feel satisfied that he had given its subject matter adequate thought. What an example for any true scientist to emulate in this age of breathless rush to "produce"—to accumulate a "personal bibliography"!

Years ago Gene Law set for himself as a major problem, for both field and study, the working up of the vertebrate fauna of the Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona. To this end he made several trips to those mountains, for which he came to have the fondest regard; collections of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians were gathered, extensive observations recorded upon a definite plan of faunal analysis, and critical

studies of the appertaining literature made. This wealth of accumulated materials will, it is now hoped, be worked up by someone well qualified to do it justice, the resulting published monograph to be dedicated to the memory of J. Eugene Law.

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