

## WALTER BRETT: 1836-1917

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By J. H. FLEMING

California has had many pioneers in natural history; some are remembered for their writings, others because of the survival of their collections. Among the naturalists working in California, half a century ago, was one of whom nothing has been written.

Walter Brett was born in London, England, April 13, 1836. He was educated in Belgium and graduated from an agricultural college. Returning to England, he later emigrated to Canada in August, 1863, settling in Hastings County, Ontario. In a letter dated November 20, 1916, he wrote: "I arrived in Belleville 60 years ago, went up the Hastings road, and settled in Tudor township, farmed with rifle and shotgun; it was easy in those days to get fish and meat." Here he remained six years, removing to Middlesex County and Niagara Falls, Ontario. (See fig. 20.)



Fig. 20. Walter Brett, photographed on October 10, 1915, in his eightieth year, at Niagara Falls, New York.

Of his diary and field books he wrote: "From 1871 to 1888, I kept a log book, a sort of general diary. It was not till February 3, 1888, that I commenced a regular systematic system of measurements and records." The records were entered in surveyors' field books, the numbers ending at 1587 in 1905.

The measurements taken of birds were, length, extent, wing, tail, thus, 4.90 x 6.80 x 2.15 x 2.10 in inches and hundredths; usually added were tarsus, middle toe and claw, and bill, thus, T<sup>s</sup> 85, M.T.C. 70, Bill 45. To the skin when made up was attached a gun wad with the catalogue number. The permanent label had locality, date, sex, scientific name, field number and A.O.U. number on the front, the measurements on the back together with any remarks as to condition, altogether a very modern label and a well made skin.

The travels of Walter Brett are clearly indicated by entries in his field books. Forty-three birds were collected at Niagara Falls, Ontario; and on May 12, 1888, collecting began at San Diego, California, and continued north till the first entry of "Clear Lake, Lake County" is made on July 20, and three days later the last entries in California, "Trout Dale, Napa County," with the entry "This collection all stolen, 44 to 147, in Wyoming." Returning to Ontario in August, the two following years were spent there and 394 birds collected.

Collecting in California really began when Brett settled at Lakeport in Lake County, January, 1891; here he remained until April, 1892, and after a trip east, he

again settled at Lakeport, in November, remaining until March, 1894. The three years spent in California resulted in an excellent series of bird skins. In 1892 Brett began a collection of mammals, with the measurements taken in inches and hundredths, but commenced the use of millimeters in January, 1894, though continuing to measure birds in inches as before. The mammal skulls were numbered and kept separate.

Brett was in 1892 a member of the California Academy of Sciences, the California Zoological Club, and a subscriber to *Zoe*. He was also in correspondence with the Smithsonian Institution: with Ridgway about the form of cormorant breeding at Clear Lake, which Brett believed to be new; with True about mammals; with Stiles about bird parasites; and I find a letter from Bendire asking for eggs of the White-tailed Kite. All this correspondence was between the years 1891 and 1895.

From California Brett removed to Halifax County, Nova Scotia, and remained there nearly five years; then back to Hastings County, Ontario, and in 1900 to Huns Valley, Manitoba, where collecting ceased after July 14. The field books record 1586 bird skins and 237 mammals collected between 1888 and 1900. In all, Brett collected 297 species of North American birds.

In a letter of November 11, 1910, Brett wrote: "I am on the verge of 74 years. I have no laurels to wear. But my bird life in the suburbs of London, England; then in Flanders, the Belgian Ardennes, and ultimately 40 years in North America, these are glorious years to refer to." Writing in November 3, 1916: "I am writing to let you know that I have reached 80 years and 6 months old, also my bird collections stayed at No. 1587, in Nova Scotia 1905."

I spent a day with Walter Brett in December, 1916, at Trenton, Ontario. He had written, "I will meet you, look out for an old chap with corduroy pants void of all fashion." I found him, as his letters had indicated, the perfect type of an English sportsman-naturalist, interested in wild life and in collecting, but beyond that a keen student of nature. Brett felt that he could no longer care for his collection and it passed into my hands by purchase; there were 1000 bird skins and 135 mammals. The birds were absorbed into my collection, and I have recently given the mammals to the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology.

Walter Brett died at Bedford, Nova Scotia, September 18, 1917, aged 81 years and 5 months, and was interred at Trenton, Ontario. I am indebted for details of Brett's life to his two sons, both of whom shared their father's interest in natural history, Mr. Richard C. Brett of Steenburg, Ontario, and Mr. Harry W. Brett, of Niagara Falls, New York.

*Toronto, Ontario, October 12, 1936.*

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## NESTING DISTRIBUTION OF THE TRI-COLORED RED-WING

WITH MAP

By JOHNSON A. NEFF

Described by the taxonomist as a species of Central or South American origin, the Tri-colored Red-wing (*Agelaius tricolor*) is one of the most interesting of American bird species. In the autumn of 1930 the writer was assigned to the Sacramento Valley district of California to investigate the relationship of blackbirds to the rice industry. During the autumn and winter of 1930-31 general studies in the vicinity of Marysville, Yuba County, occupied the entire period; although a few Tri-colored Red-wings