

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF JAMES MOFFITT

By HILDA W. GRINNELL

James Moffitt was born in San Francisco on March 21, 1900, elder son of Dr. Herbert C. and Marguerite (Joliffe) Moffitt. His paternal grandfather, whose name he was given, was born in Enniskillen, Ireland, on February 10, 1827. While still an infant he was brought by his parents to New York. In 1849 he came to San Francisco, where on June 13, 1863, he was married to Delia Kennedy, born February 8, 1837, in County Meath, Ireland. This earlier James Moffitt was one of the stable citizens who took part in the lasting enterprises of the young city of San Francisco. Two of his ventures may be mentioned here: in partnership with Francis Blake he engaged in the printing business in 1853, and many of the first issues of the San Francisco newspapers were printed in their shop; he was one of the four men responsible for the building of San Francisco's first cable road.

James Moffitt, the grandson, grew up in the Bay Region and was married on September 30, 1922, at Ross, Marin County, to Elizabeth Schmiedell, herself of Californian pioneer stock. Their only child, a daughter, Alice, is the wife of Captain Richard Gatterdam, United States Army Air Force.

James entered the University of California at Berkeley in 1917, but shortly thereafter enlisted as a cadet in the United States Naval Reserve. Following the close of the war he returned for a short time to his college studies, leaving them, however, to become affiliated with the San Francisco firm of Blake, Moffitt and Towne. A business career proving too confining for one with his deep love of the out-of-doors, he found attractive a proffered appointment as a research assistant with the California Division of Fish and Game. The position was accepted and the connection, with some changes of title, was continued for three years. It terminated with Moffitt's resignation, tendered in May of 1934.

The summer which followed was largely spent at his vacation camp in Mendocino County, winter wren country, where primeval redwoods and Douglas firs shade the lesser growths of tan oak, alder and ash along the stream courses, but where Sonoran islands diversify the landscape on the westering ridges which separate the watersheds of the Garcia and Navarro rivers.

In October of that year came a long-anticipated eastern trip, the first of three such journeys, which brought opportunity to study geese in museum collections and to cement friendships with such men as Fred Kennard and John C. Phillips.

When in May of 1936 Moffitt was appointed Curator of Birds and Mammals in the California Academy of Sciences, his eastern experience with differing curatorial methods proved of value and was doubtless one of the factors influencing his determination to re-arrange the Academy's collection of sixty thousand birds skins in accordance with a modern system.

The months of time consumed in this work and in other curatorial labors postponed the completion of two papers on which Moffitt had for ten years expended much thought, a report on the birds of the Lake Tahoe region, and a study of the geese of North America. It is gratifying to know that the first-mentioned project is to be completed by Dr. Robert T. Orr and that the second is to be placed in equally competent hands.

It was inevitable that James Moffitt should be especially interested in the Lake Tahoe region, for from his fourth to his twentieth year all his summers were spent at

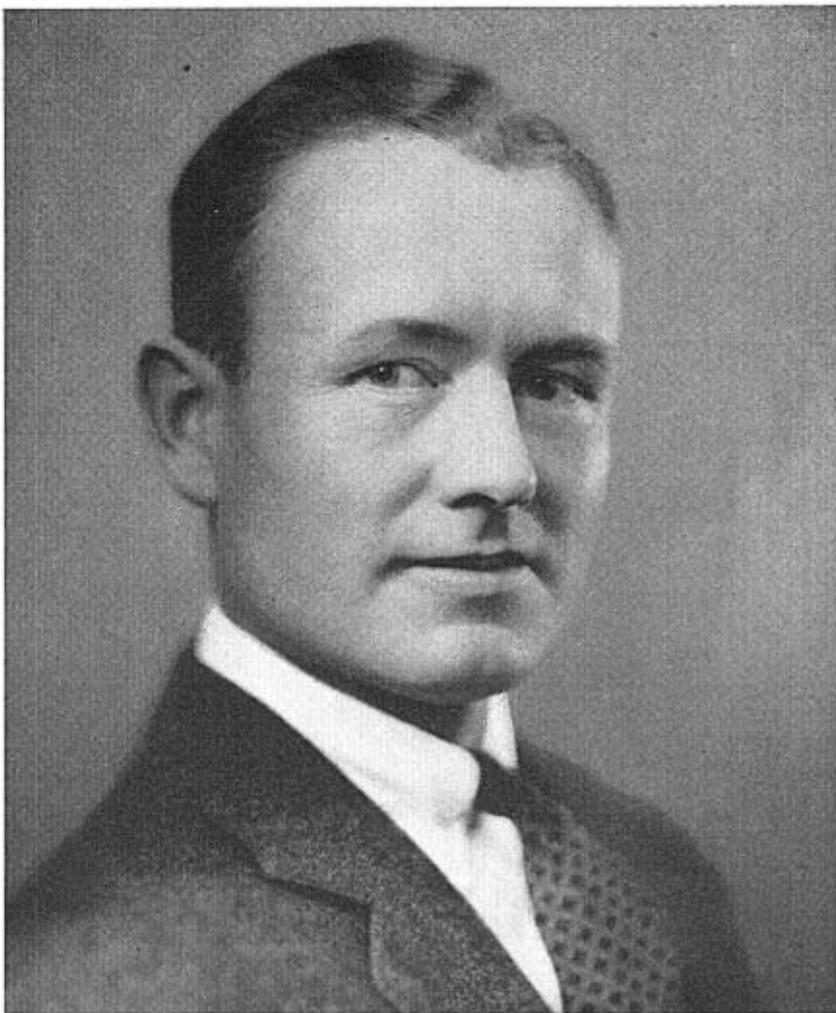


Fig. 11. James Moffitt in 1940.

the lake and many trips were taken far afield from there with his father, or with Bob Watson, an old time resident, who trapped in the winter and served as a packer and guide in the summer time and in the deer hunting season.

Many shorter vacation visits were made to the lake and one entire winter, in company with his wife and small daughter, was spent at Tahoe in order to study those hardy birds which remain through the period of deep snows.

Just when the way was clearing for intensive work on these papers, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor re-awakened the strong feeling of patriotism which had caused James Moffitt's enlistment in the first world war as a boy of eighteen. At first disqualified because of partial deafness in one ear, he persisted in seeking to be in active service. His patience and perseverance triumphed in his being sworn into service as a Lieutenant in the United States Naval Reserve, in San Francisco on April 22, 1942.

Assigned to duty as an officer on the staff of the Commander of a Fleet Air Wing in

the Aleutians, he rejoiced that his duties would take him to a region where waterfowl abound. A glimpse of what he found there is given in a letter dated April 9, 1943, and addressed to Alden Miller:

"I left Seattle nearly five months ago and that does seem a long time now. Have been to three places here since then, first one of bear fame for three weeks, then on, via a stop-over at the type locality of the westmost *Passerella iliaca*, to where Harrold did some collecting for the C.A.S., then the type locality for *Lagopus rupestris nelsoni*. There I spent Christmas, New Year's, and a little over two weeks' time. The big Rosy Finches were feeding in the streets, common, and perching on the house tops! Harlequins and Old Squaws, feeding and diving outside my window, along shore . . ."

"I have had two or three good bird walks. One, on Feb. 24, will interest you, because I saw 31 (all told) EUROPEAN Green-winged Teal (positive iden., close, through 8—glass). These, known to nest here, also apparently winter, as do many other surface feeding ducks—as—that same day: Mallard—20; Pintail—167; others, diving ducks: Amer. Goldeneye 2; Bufflehead 23; Old Squaw 6; Harlequin (very numerous here) 47; Amer. Scoter 21; Pac. Eider 21. To give you an idea of the littoral, plus lagoon and grassland & tundra birdlife that day (4 hours), in addition to the above I saw: Red-th. Loon 1; Pelagic Cormorant 4; Emperor Goose 37; Glaucous-w (Iden. not too sure) Gull 22; Bald Eagle 2; RAVEN 26; Winter Wren 4; Song Sparrow (the largest one) 9. You see that land birds are extremely scarce, in winter at least."

"I've had good chances to study the Emperor Geese, sometimes at 30 yards range, mad[d]ening when I can't shoot. They frequent rocky coast, much like the ocean off Tomales Point, and sit and feed (on what?, among algae), on small rocks, just off shore, near the surf. Harlequins & Old Squaws & Amer. Scoters, bob around them in the rough water. Usually, 12 to 25 geese will be on neighboring small rocks, but not more than 2 to 5 on a single one . . ."

With the longer hours of daylight and the better weather which he hoped would come with the lengthening days, James Moffitt planned to utilize every coming chance for further observations on the waterfowl of the Aleutian chain, but death came to him on July 2, 1943, in the crash of a naval transport plane at Dutch Harbor, Unalaska, ending a career which each year gave greater promise.

One of James Moffitt's contributions to western ornithology, and not a minor one, was his generous hospitality to bird students from other states and countries. Always ably seconded by Mrs. Moffitt, his every energy was bent toward giving these visitors as complete a picture of game bird conditions in California as their schedules permitted. On this mission his big red Buick travelled uncounted miles as he made such men as John H. Baker, Major Allan Brooks, Jean Delacour, Frederic Kennard, John C. Phillips and Peter Scott acquainted with California's shoreline, marshes, rice fields, gun clubs, and even the bleak plains of Modoc County.

James Moffitt joined the Cooper Ornithological Club in 1917. He became an associate of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1926, advancing to the rank of member in 1937. He joined the Audubon Association of the Pacific in 1936 and in 1941 served as its president. In October, 1941, his efforts in behalf of the conservation of wild life were recognized in his appointment to the board of directors of the National Audubon Society. Among other organizations with which he was associated were the California Academy of Sciences, which he joined at the age of nineteen and where, as before mentioned, he became Curator of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy in May of 1936; the British Ornithologists' Union; the Wilson Ornithological Club; the American Society of Mammalogists; the Grinnell Naturalists Society.

Of James Moffitt's seventy-seven published writings eleven concern deer. The first (Calif. Fish and Game, 12, 1926:124-127) was printed some seven years before his official connection with the State Division of Fish and Game. It was incited by a recommendation of the San Joaquin County Game and Fish Protective Association that the game laws be changed to provide a uniform opening date for deer hunting in all districts of California. Moffitt well knew the differing lives led by the black-tailed deer of the coast counties and the mule deer of the Sierras and realized that differing opening dates for the hunting season were needed in the two areas.

From his eleventh year, according to his own statement (Condor, 28, 1926:241), Moffitt hunted ducks and geese on the Suisun marshes. He had noted differences in voice, flight, and feeding habits among the flocks of wintering geese which made him read with especial interest Swarth and Bryant's study of the races of White-fronted Geese occurring in California. Thus stimulated, his own interest in field characters became more acute and resulted in the appearance nine years later of his "Notes on White-fronted and Tule Geese in Central California" (*loc. cit.*). Here he confirms and amplifies the earlier field observations of Judge Henshaw and Sam Lamme on the differing habits of these two races.

The paper entitled "The White-cheeked Goose in California" (Condor, 39, 1937: 149-159) was the result of a desire to test the prediction made by Harry Swarth that if the White-cheeked Goose "occurs in this state at all it should be found along the extreme northern coast." To this area Moffitt made four trips, the first three while connected with the California Division of Fish and Game, the fourth, with Mrs. Moffitt, in the spring of 1937. The specimens obtained together with the information gained from old residents of the region confirmed Swarth's theory and added the race *occidentalis* to the forms of *Branta canadensis* known to winter in California. These and the other papers on geese which are listed among Moffitt's writings were preliminary notes to be followed by his exhaustive study of North American geese. Of the collection of skins which he amassed with the above study in view it has been said (Academy Newsletter, 44, August, 1943:3) "His personal collection of these important game birds now represents the finest of its type in western North America. Systematic and neat in his own ways he was meticulously careful in his preparation of material. No finer examples of the art of preparing bird skins are to be found in any museum."

When in 1931 he became associated with the State Division of Fish and Game, James Moffitt instituted an annual census of the numbers of Black Brant wintering on those California bays that support a growth of eel grass. February 11 and 12 were selected as the ideal dates for making these surveys. For twelve years Moffitt himself took charge of the work, aided by members of the Division and other interested institutions and individuals. The reports were each year compiled by him and published in California Fish and Game, as listed in the appended bibliography. These reports are evaluated by Brian Curtis, editor of "California Fish and Game," "as the most important long-range survey of bird populations in this part of the world."

Another project to which Moffitt gave much time and thought was a survey of the waterfowl breeding within the limits of California. One of his main objects in making this survey was to acquaint sportsmen and duck club owners with the State's possibilities as a duck breeding area. He felt that by the controlled use of water on shooting lands now allowed to dry out in summer the annual crop of resident species could be much increased. He believed that many sportsmen are unaware of the extent to which California served as a breeding ground in early days.

An analysis of the ecological factors controlling the seasonal abundance of water-

winnowing process of time will leave his contributions a permanent place in ornithological literature.

PUBLISHED WRITINGS OF JAMES MOFFITT

(Adapted from a bibliography published in the California Academy of Sciences News Letter, Number 44, August, 1943:5-7)

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1931. The status of the Canada goose in California. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 17:20-26, figs. 13-16.
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First annual black sea brant census in California. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 17:396-401, figs. 104-106.
Some protected birds the duck hunter should know. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 17:412-420, figs. 117-120.
Banding Canada geese in California in 1931. *Condor*, 33:229-237, figs. 54-57.
The status of the blue-winged teal in California. *Condor*, 33:247-248.
Red-breasted merganser in Orange County, California, in June. *Condor*, 33:252.
Wood ibis in Modoc County, California. *Condor*, 33:256.
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The Townsend solitaire in San Francisco. *Condor*, 34:190-191.
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New fish and game code. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:67-68.
Regulations governing importation of certain wild birds and animals. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:68.
Oregon adopts upland game bird land-owner contract law. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:77-78.
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Death of buck deer result of fighting in rut. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:82-84, fig. 17.
Deer fencing law repealed. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:84.
Deer hunting success in Angeles National forest. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:84-85.
[Review of] Sheldon's deer of California. *Fish and Game*, 20:85-87.
[Review of] Grinnell's review of California mammal fauna. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:87-91.
Federal wild-life restoration program. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:163-166.
1933 deer kill statistics. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:166.
Deer herd winters well. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:166.
Revised estimate of 1933 California waterfowl abundance. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:167-168.
Addition to list of totally excluded animals—state importation law. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:168.
Funds for federal wild-life restoration program shrink. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:287.
In memory of F. W. Van Sicklen. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:288.
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Unusual age attained by wild geese. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:291-292, fig. 113.
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Fourth annual black brant census in California. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 20:355-364, fig. 136.
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