
In Memoriam:

Robert James Newman

1907–1988

H. Douglas Pratt

THE WORLDS OF BIRDING AND ORNITHOLOGY were significantly diminished by the death on January 28, 1988, of Robert James Newman. At age 79, despite years of declining health, Bob Newman remained active both in the field and as Christmas Bird Count Regional Editor for the Central Southern Region for *American Birds*, a post he had held for 11 years. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Newman was a very active contributor to *Audubon Field Notes*, writing the "Changing Seasons" on seven separate occasions during that period, and serving as Regional Editor for the Central Southern Region from 1950 through 1961. In January, of 1962, Bob Newman began serving on the Board of Editorial Advisors of *Audubon Field Notes*, and continued as an Editorial Advisor for *American Birds* until his death. He is survived by his wife Marcella Habros Newman, better known as Marcie, who was his frequent field companion.

Born July 6, 1907, in Philadelphia, Newman attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a B.A. in 1927 with a major in English. By 1945, his interest in birds brought him to graduate school in zoology at

Louisiana State University (hereafter, L.S.U.), where he received an M.S. in 1951 and a Ph.D. in 1956. At L.S.U. he began a nearly lifelong collaboration with George H. Lowery, Jr., then a young professor who only a few years before had begun the collections of the L.S.U. Museum of Natural Science, now a world-renowned ornithological institution. Newman was the museum's first Curator of Birds. His role in the growth of the museum was significant, beginning in the 1940s with several major expeditions undertaken by him and Marcie to the Mexican state of San Luis Potosi. The Newmans' specimens not only formed the nucleus of what has become one of the world's largest collections of neotropical birds, but the high quality of their preparations set a standard that has been an inspiration to all subsequent collectors. Newman's pioneering work in San Luis Potosi paved the way for numerous later L.S.U. graduate students and influenced such notable students of Mexican birds as George Miksch Sutton and Roger Tory Peterson. Like many other young birders influenced by Peterson and James Fisher's epic birding adventure *Wild America*, I first knew of Bob Newman as the

authors' guide for their first experience with birding in the tropics.

During the 1950s, Newman collaborated with Lowery on a major study of bird migration using a technique they pioneered of observing birds silhouetted against the face of the moon. The project coordinated the efforts of about 2500 volunteer observers throughout continental North America, who watched birds fly past the moon on four nights in October, of 1952. Much of what we know about the direction, rate, and hourly magnitude of fall migration has its foundation in this landmark study. (For a more detailed account of this research, see Fran James' obituary of Newman to be published in *The Auk*)

Health problems curtailed Newman's field work during the early 1960s, but he continued to contribute behind the scenes to the research program at L.S.U. His unusual combination of fields (English and Zoology) make him uniquely qualified as an editor of scientific manuscripts. Until his retirement in 1976, not a word was published by anyone associated with the museum that had not passed his often excruciatingly critical eye. His methods made him a masterful teacher as well as an editor. Never one



Robert James Newman near Madisonville, Louisiana, December 1984. Photograph/
J.V. Remsen.

to simply mark a manuscript and hand it back, he required the often recalcitrant author to sit with him as he went through the paper line by line. No progress was made until he was satisfied that the author fully understood the reasons for each and every revision or correction. Often, such discussions became a vehicle for one of Newman's amusing anecdotes for which he was well known and appreciated. Although tedious, this experience was probably more valuable to Lowery's graduate students than many of their "official" courses.

In the late 1960s, after a long absence from the field, Newman decided that the pleasures of birding outweighed any risks to his health. He was still unwilling to risk driving a vehicle, but his talents as an observer, not to mention his witty and clever stories and word games during long drives, made him a wonderful birding

companion. Many of us were eager to serve as his chauffeur. For the last two decades of his life, birding was Newman's all-consuming passion. He was the quintessential "local birder," only rarely venturing outside the boundaries of Louisiana. He kept a state list, year lists, and monthly lists, and eventually tallied an astounding 91% of the state's birds. He insisted on careful documentation of sight records and was scrupulously honest with his own. His field observations made him a deep well of information from which other birders could draw freely. They returned the favor by making sure he recorded as many of the rarities needed for his Louisiana list as possible. Eventually "Bob Newman's List" became something of an institution, and his friends gave him a membership in the American Birding Association so his accomplishment could be publicized.

One of Newman's birding goals, never fully realized, was to see 200 species in Louisiana in every month of the year. I well remember the sense of adventure when, late in January 1972, with his month's total at 197, Bob and I made a desperate "run for the roses." On a cold, rainy Sunday expedition to try to find an American Black Duck or a Bewick's Wren, we found ourselves low on gas in a sparsely settled part of central Louisiana. Relieved to find an apparently open station, we were dismayed to find it out of gas. A little further on, we were told, was another station sure to have some. As we gingerly proceeded, Bob joked that with our bad luck that ominous black cloud of smoke we had noticed on the horizon would be our service station burning down. We laughed until, drawing nearer, we both realized he was right! We somehow managed to find gasoline, but then were nearly stuck in deep mud near Catahoula Lake as we scanned the flocks of ducks. We got our duck, but the wren eluded us. On the last day of January we found number 199, an Anhinga, in the Atchafalaya Basin, but Bob's 200 was not to be. Nor was he tempted to cheat when we finally found a Bewick's Wren only a few miles from home on February 5.

Such exploits were not only great fun, but produced a wealth of new knowledge about bird distribution in the state, a typical Newman combination of research and recreation. He never denigrated the efforts of amateurs and encouraged many of them to go on to make solid scientific contributions. He was an ornithologist's birder and a birder's ornithologist. He leaves behind a vast body of "Newman folklore" that will be recounted for years to come at Christmas Bird Counts, meetings, and informal gatherings. At times cantankerous, at times irascible, but always entertaining, Robert J. Newman will be fondly remembered by all the graduate students, birding companions, colleagues, and friends whose lives he touched.

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