

GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

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Photo by Grace R. Ray

HAD I been writing a hundred years ago, there could be no doubt but that a subtitle most certainly would have been mandatory. To wit:

Gentleman, Scholar, Author, Artist, Explorer, Raconteur, Philanthropist, and Connoisseur of Whale Blubber and Sundry Other Rare Culinary Delicacies.

Even this subtitle, however, would not encompass all of the talents and personality traits of the man whom it has been my good fortune to have known for over 20 years.

If one could ever epitomize with a single word any complex human being, that one word for George Sutton would be *enthusiastic*. This boundless and infectious enthusiasm he manifests both in the confines of his office, with only one or two other persons present, and in large gatherings. Moreover, the enthusiasm is in no way limited to his interest in birds alone, but in any aspect of biology, as well as in history, music, literature, and the fine arts, which is to say, in all of the good and desirable things in life itself.

George Sutton is a teacher *par excellence*. He did not teach a single formal course during his all too short tenure at the University of Michigan, and, yet, I and many other graduate students certainly learned more through our association with him than we did

in much of our class work. George Sutton has an intuitive way of teaching by the example he sets.

George Sutton introduced me to proof-reading shortly after I entered the Graduate School of the University of Michigan in 1946 after nearly five years of military service. Meeting in the hall of the University Museums one day, he said something like this: "Andy, if you have the time, I'd appreciate it if you would give me your suggestions on a paper on the Green Jay that I have in galley proof." At that time, I probably had never even heard of the Green Jay, and George Sutton knew it, but this was his way of exposing a new student to taxonomic problems and to proofreading.

I have never ceased to be amazed at George Sutton's wealth of knowledge. During the period that I was reading intensively for the comprehensive examination, I frequently came across "new and startling" facts. I felt certain that sometime I would be able to add to George Sutton's store of facts about birds, and would innocently inquire if he had heard of such and such. He invariably had heard, and I gave up trying to educate him on the day I asked if he knew the color of the yolk of the oystercatcher's egg. He not only told me at once but proceeded to give a detailed lecture on variation in color of both the yolk and the albumen among birds' eggs, virtually all of which was new to me.

Insofar as it is possible in our time, George Sutton believes in the complete education of the man. This philosophy often expresses itself during Ph.D. oral examinations, much to the consternation of the nervous candidates. Knowing that H. B. Tordoff had a very good knowledge of world birds, for example, Sutton quizzed him on birds in literature. He grilled me thoroughly on the order Pelecaniformes, knowing full well that I had never seen more than one or two of the mainland species of this order in the field. This surely was the Master's way of pointing out to the student that there is never an end to learning, and, I presume, that the new Ph.D. should keep his ego in perspective.

His selection of me as his Assistant Editor for *The Wilson Bulletin* when he assumed the Editorship in 1950, was, I feel certain, purely and simply a matter of his seeing to my continuing education. My first assignments concerned general notes and book reviews, but we also made dummy layouts for each issue, and we proofread to each other every single word, comma, and period of both galley and page proofs; we routinely checked quotations against the original sources. There were days when it seemed to me that we spent most of the time thumbing through dictionaries and atlases, searching out the precise meaning and nuance of words or of the preferred spelling for some remote place name. I was being tutored by a true scholar in the finest tradition of the past.

Over the years The Wilson Ornithological Society and *The Wilson Bulletin* have invariably received George Sutton's first allegiance and support. His support has been demonstrated in innumerable ways. In addition to his term as Editor of *The Wilson Bulletin*, he served as President of the Society during 1942-43 and 1946-47. His paintings often have appeared in *The Wilson Bulletin*. He has sometimes financed the printing of his own art work as well as that of others. The fact is that, in true philanthropic manner, his numerous gifts for many purposes (beyond art work) have rarely been publicized, or even known to anyone except the recipient.

George Sutton has been a contributor to *The Wilson Bulletin* for 45 years. "Notes on the Road-Runner at Fort Worth, Texas" (accompanied by his black-and-white frontispiece of an adult Roadrunner on its nest) was published in Volume 34 in 1922. Many papers on a wide variety of subjects have been published since that time.

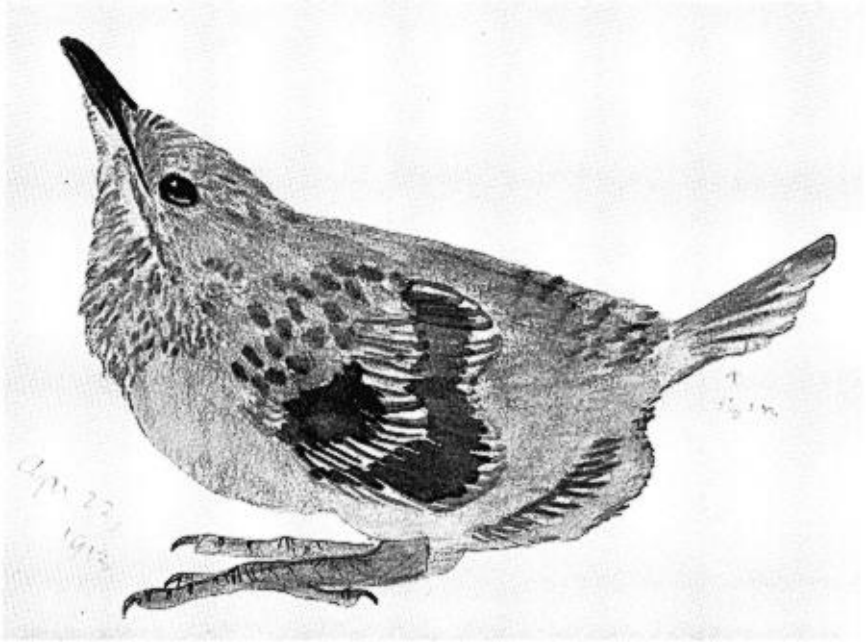


FIG. 1. A young Roadrunner still in the nestling stage. Dr. Sutton believes this to be his first direct-from-life bird drawing. It was made on 22 April 1913, a short time before the artist's fifteenth birthday. Reproduced here for the first time by courtesy of George Miksch Sutton.

George Sutton has contributed substantially to the Society by his attendance at annual meetings: by participating in the business sessions of the Council, by giving papers, or by delivering the main banquet address. He has, at the same time, over the years contributed both to the Society and to ornithology in general by his sincere interested and animated discussions with amateurs and graduate students, many of whom were attending their first scientific meeting. As every teacher knows, it is impossible to appreciate fully (or, sometimes, even to be aware of) the extent of the influence that such a dynamic man has upon the future of others, even as the result of a single conversation.

That George Sutton is one of the world's finest bird artists is well known. Many of us agree wholeheartedly with Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., who wrote:

"Whether George Sutton's eminence in bird art is greater than in ornithology or popular writing, no one can say. But this I can say: In his life-long devotion to delineating the living bird, he has acquired a singular style that to many of us is sheer perfection" (1966. *Florida Naturalist*, 39:136).

In addition to illustrating his own works, George Sutton has provided many fine illustrations—both color and pen-and-ink—for other books. Examples are "Birds of

Western Pennsylvania," "The Birds of Arizona," "Georgia Birds," Pettingill's two volumes of "Guide to Bird Finding," and "Fundamentals of Ornithology."

Members who attended the annual meeting at Crawford Notch, New Hampshire, in June of 1967 were able to examine his exquisite watercolors of arctic birds, many of which looked as though they were on the very verge of hopping off of the paper to scurry around the room. In the artists' world, as well, George Sutton has been an inveterate teacher. I know a number of the budding bird artists he encouraged and coached (e.g., Robert S. Butsch, William A. Lunk, Robert M. Mengel, David F. Parmelee), but, unfortunately, I have no idea how many there have been over the past 40 years; it surely has been a goodly number. As I surmised, "Doc," as he is known to all of his students, required only two attributes in the potential art student: a genuine interest in bird painting and talent. Given these, his time and patience seemed to be unlimited.

George Sutton has few peers as a lecturer. His apparent effortless delivery is due in large measure to his wide command of appropriate words, his keen sense of story structure, and his flair for the dramatic effect. Only such a truly gifted lecturer can hold an audience spellbound for over an hour without illustrations of any sort. As Dr. Pettingill once expressed it: "Indeed, for Sutton, illustrations hinder his impact whereas for most lecturers illustrations are a necessary crutch."

As an author, George Sutton has his own inimitable style, one filled with enthusiasm, perception, color, and new personal information.

I have often wondered how many readers of "Birds in the Wilderness" soon thereafter woke up in a cold sweat some night after dreaming of struggling to escape from that rotting, hollow log and its Turkey Vultures (vomiting adult, egg, and newly-hatched young), not to mention grand-daddy longlegs and white-footed mice:

"In a panic I tried to back out, only to find myself powerless. It appeared that in my toes, which could push me forward, was my only propellant power. I was doomed to stay, or to go ahead! I breathed hard, spent with exertion. There did not seem to be enough air in the place. My ribs were crowded."

One can visit the arctic regions ("The Exploration of Southampton Island, Hudson Bay," "Eskimo Year," "Iceland Summer") or the jungles of Mexico ("Mexican Birds, First Impressions") with George Sutton and feel as though one were travelling with him, sharing in each new find and facing each emergency. "Iceland Summer" earned him the John Burroughs Medal, which is awarded for excellence in nature writing. "Oklahoma Birds," his latest book, was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1967, and represents the fulfillment of a desire born 30 years ago.

Another of George Sutton's conspicuous traits is his interest in people. This is shown, of course, in his skill as a teacher. It also is revealed in his writing, both scientific and popular. He invariably gives credit where credit is due, to all of those who assisted in any way or to those who were merely companions. This is, in a sense, a matter of intellectual honesty, but with George Sutton it is more than that. It demonstrates his deep sense of the importance of people and friendship, of the drama in life, and of the historic value of people and events. This sense of the value of individuals is just one of the factors that adds color and warmth to his writing.

It has been said that field ornithologists are born and not made. I have never met a better field ornithologist than George Sutton, nor do I ever expect to meet one.

Because of George Sutton's numerous talents, it may seem strange to many readers that perhaps what I have missed most during the past 16 years has been the opportunity to accompany him on field trips. Those that I remember most vividly were field trips

at the University of Michigan's Edwin S. George Reserve in Livingston County, Michigan, where Sutton studied for many years. I must admit, however, that he had the unpleasant habit of insisting that the first field trip of the day take place before breakfast. Moreover, he led at a brisk pace, typically outdistancing his companions 18 to 25 years younger. But, he knew every trail, every callnote, and every bird song. He often recognized a distant faint call or a mere fragment of a song which had escaped the rest of us. He stopped frequently, to point out an alarm note or a territorial song, or, at times, to examine tracks in a dusty road: tracks of deer, raccoon, or Vesper Sparrows. He stopped in the Big Woods to listen to the songs of the Acadian Flycatcher and the Cerulean Warbler—and his companions rested. He stopped along the edge of Fishhook Marsh to search for a Brewster's Warbler—and his companions thought mostly about breakfast as they swatted mosquitoes. At breakfast there always was a stimulating discussion of the morning's findings and of the plans for the remainder of the day. I remember driving the Reserve's dirt roads at night, alert for the eye-shine of Whip-poor-wills sitting in the road or at its edge, while Sutton told us of differences in the eye-shine color of Mexican birds.

Few are the ornithologists as gifted as George Sutton in finding birds' nests. So thorough is his knowledge of the breeding behavior of birds that a specific alarm note will let him know at once that a nest is nearby. After scanning the habitat, he often is able to walk directly to the nest, or at least to the tree or bush or tuft of grass containing it.

Because he is an exceptional field ornithologist and author, it might be expected that Sutton keeps meticulous field notes, and this is so. His diligence in writing field notes is exemplary. No matter how strenuous his day has been in the field, and no matter how many skins or sketches are to be prepared near the end of the day, he invariably records in detail his observations and impressions before he thinks of going to sleep. His voluminous notes are, of course, invaluable for his writing at a later time.

George Sutton is an artist in the preparation of bird skins. The size and proportions of his completed skins are perfect; every feather is in proper place; there is no trace of fat, blood, or dirt. One can, almost invariably, pick out a Sutton-made skin from among many skins in a museum drawer, perhaps occasionally being misled by a skin prepared by his most talented student, H. B. Tordoff. A Sutton label contains a wealth of information about the specimen, sometimes including the phrase "no feathers lost." Only someone who has tried to prepare bird skins can fully appreciate that phrase and the pride which must accompany its writing.

George Sutton raised Roadrunners (and other species) and studied their behavior long before most contemporary bird ethologists were born. His "Suggestive Methods of Bird-study: Pet Road-runners" was published in *Bird-Lore* in 1915 (Vol. 17:57-61); this article also contained his first published drawing—that of a pet Roadrunner "in an attitude of fright." Much later he made a thorough study of the molts and plumages of various passerine birds and had his fling as a "sparrow rancher" (1948. *Audubon Magazine*, 50:286-295), again observing the developing behavior patterns as the nestlings grew to become fledglings and then juvenile birds.

I would be remiss, indeed, if I did not call attention to the fact that George Sutton is not only a gourmet but that he is what we may appropriately call a "zoological gourmet." By this I mean that in addition to his Epicurean tastes for the food and drink of "civilized" society, he has a fine appreciation of the foods available on expeditions in the wilderness, particularly when provisions are in short supply. He not infrequently told me of some of his special treats, and I envied him and his field

companions. Not wanting to trust my memory, however, I wrote for confirmation. Here is what George Sutton replied (letter of 6 December 1967):

“Are you now delving into the mysteries of the cholesterol content of human blood? You must be. I’ve eaten white whale (beluga: *kellilughak*) blubber many times, but never Greenland whale (*akvik*) blubber. I’ve eaten lots and lots of *netchek* seal blubber, some *oogjook* seal blubber, and some *kashigiak* seal blubber. Doesn’t all this make your mouth water? But I don’t recall ever eating a meal that was *all* blubber. The ideal meal in winter on Southampton Island was some raw caribou plus some cooked caribou and cooked seal blubber. Delicious! Another wonderful meal was fried char plus raw caribou plus cooked seal blubber. I didn’t like raw seal blubber. It too often had a ‘weaselly’ smell.

“I’ve eaten many kinds of wild duck and goose eggs, of course; tern eggs galore; gull eggs galore; one set of Whistling Swan eggs; and a good many Snowy Owl eggs. All these were good.”

Few people probably are aware of the inner struggles faced by a man with so many talents: author, artist, explorer, teacher, lecturer. How does such a man budget his time? Not so much his days, but his weeks and months and years. It is the curse of man that each day has but 24 hours, and that they pass all too fast for the busy creative man. I am not certain that George Sutton feels completely happy about the way he has budgeted his time thus far, but those of us who have read his books, enjoyed his paintings, been stimulated by his lectures, and been inspired by his teaching feel that he has greatly enriched our lives beyond any acknowledgment with mere words. For us his time has been budgeted very well indeed.

Although I have written partly in terms of my own indebtedness and admiration, I also have the privilege here of expressing the sincerest thanks, the deepest admiration, and the very best wishes of countless friends to George Miksch Sutton on the occasion of his 70th birthday.—DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, HONOLULU.