

THE MIDDLE YEARS OF THE WILSON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY: 1922-1955

GEORGE A. HALL¹

1922-1932

The Wilson Ornithological Club continued to grow during these years and a concerted membership drive brought on by a financial crisis enlisted 162 new members in 1921. After much debate at the 1921 meeting, the dues were raised to \$2.50 for Active Members and \$1.50 for Associate Members (Ganier 1922). The different classes of membership were apparently "distinguished" simply by the amount of dues a member was willing to pay. By the end of this period membership held steady at about 700, with a rather high annual turnover. While numerous professional ornithologists appear on the membership list, most of the members appear to have been amateur bird students. The leaders of the Club, such as Lynds Jones, Reuben M. Strong, T. C. Stephens, and others, were biologists, usually college professors, although the professional ornithologist H. C. Oberholser was a Vice President in 1921 and George M. Sutton was Vice President in 1929-1930.

A new constitution was presented in 1930. At that time six Honorary Members were nominated: Founders Leon Pindar, Reuben M. Strong, Lynds Jones, and Franklin L. Burns, as well as Althea Sherman and Otto Widmann. In this year an agreement was reached with the University of Michigan to establish a library. The University was to provide housing for what was called the W.O.C. Research Library. The rules established at that time are essentially those that pertain today for this library, now known as the Josselyn Van Tyne Memorial Library.

The contents of *The Wilson Bulletin* continued to be dominated by faunal lists and life histories. However, except for the lack of technical papers on taxonomy or anatomy, the contents differed little from those of *The Auk* at the same period. In 1924 Editor Jones commented that he believed that simple local lists no longer merited publication, but there was little change in the *Bulletin* as a result of this.

Secretaries Ganier and Gordon Wilson contributed a lengthy section to each issue on "Personal Notes," outlining activities and affairs of members gleaned from their official correspondence. These tended to cement

¹ Dept. of Chemistry, West Virginia Univ., P.O. Box 6045, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506-6045.

the “clubbiness” of the organization. Albert F. Ganier (President, 1924–1926), a southern gentleman of the old school, was an important part of the Club at that time. He was a civil engineer by profession who became a major figure in the development of ornithology in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi. He lived into the 1970s and was an outspoken critic of the drift of the Wilson Society away from field ornithology. This scorn for “new fangled” ideas was the subject for an Auklet sketch (Bandwagon 1965).

In 1922 a “Department of Bird-Banding” under W. I. Lyon (1922) became a feature of *The Wilson Bulletin* and was continued for several years. This section of the journal included notes submitted by banders that were similar to those now published in *North American Bird Bander*. A paper in 1922 by Leon Cole traced the history of bird banding in North America. That year also saw the first paper published in *The Wilson Bulletin* by George Sutton (1922).

An event of major importance was Lynds Jones’ retirement as Editor of *The Wilson Bulletin* after having served for 36 years. The new editor was T. C. Stephens, a biology professor at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. In his editorials over the years Stephens expressed a number of views that, while then out of step with the time, are now widely accepted. For instance, in 1929 he suggested that holders of collecting permits be required ultimately to turn their specimens over to museums, the practice today. In 1934a he presented a discussion of English names for subspecies that prefigures our present ideas.

The year 1926 saw two major milestones in *Wilson Bulletin* history. In the first issue the classic figure of Wilson’s Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*) by George Sutton made its debut on the cover, and in the June issue a Sutton painting of American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*) became the first colorplate to be published in the journal. Four other colorplates appeared before 1930. Gradually new kinds of papers began to appear. In 1925 Althea Sherman published her famous paper denouncing the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*), starting a lively controversy. In 1929 an important paper on Harris’ Sparrows (*Zonotrichia querula*) by M. H. Swenk and O. A. Stevens was illustrated by another Sutton colorplate. The June issue of 1931 included one of Margaret Nice’s first papers on the Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). In 1932 papers by S. C. Kendeigh and V. E. Shelford were important analyses of the Merriam Temperature Laws and their failure.

Annual meetings were held each year, almost always in conjunction with some other meeting. If the American Association for the Advancement of Science was meeting in the Midwest, the Club met jointly with that large organization. Such meetings were traditionally during the Christmas-New Year’s holiday break. In years when the A.A.A.S. was

not available, meetings were held jointly with such organizations as the Inland Bird Banding Association, The Ecological Society of America, and, indeed, once (1922) jointly with the American Ornithologists' Union at Chicago. These meetings were usually on the Thanksgiving weekend. The timing of the meetings reflects the predominantly academic character of the leaders of the Club, as well as a prevailing negative attitude of colleges and universities towards faculty members taking time off to attend meetings. Attendance at these meetings was usually around 100 people, but at Des Moines in 1929, 202 people attended. The attendance in 1927 at Nashville was small enough that the whole group could attend a reception at the home of Past President Albert Ganier. The group photographs of these meetings reveal that most of the people attending were middle-aged or older, and young people were not really evident until about 1931. The people attending the meetings, like the leaders of the Club, were generally not professional ornithologists, but were either professional biologists, usually educators, or interested amateurs. In 1932 for the first time the Club held a meeting independently of any large national organization, but for a few more years the earlier practice prevailed. The papers given at the meetings were similar to those published in the *Bulletin*.

1933–1943

The Great Depression finally caught up with the Club and it was decided that no meeting should be held in 1933. In 1934 the Editor commented that Treasurer W. M. Rosene was president of one of the very few banks in his county which did not fail during the bank crisis, and hence the Club's funds were intact (Stephens 1934b). Membership at this time, however, decreased only slightly.

A questionnaire issued in 1938 resulted in an analysis of membership by Secretary O. S. Pettingill in 1939. This breakdown revealed that 24.8% of the members were teachers, 16% were businessmen, 13.5% were students, and the remainder was distributed among various professions (Pettingill 1939). Many of the early leaders of the Wilson Society were men who earned their livelihoods outside the field of biology. In 1938 Margaret Nice became the first woman to head a major American ornithological organization. Membership slowly began to increase, with intensive membership campaigns carried out by Secretaries L. E. Hicks and O. S. Pettingill, Jr. By 1941 membership had topped 1000.

Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. (President, 1948–50) is a professional ornithologist and photographer, who was a college professor at the time he was elected Secretary. His service to the Society dates from 1937 and his contributions, which continue to this day, have been many. Lawrence E. Hicks (President, 1940–41) of Ohio was also a professional ornithologist and a prodigious worker, both in the field and for the Club. A flamboyant

character, he sometimes let his enthusiasm overcome his scientific caution and thus many of his records are suspect at the present time.

In 1934 the Annual Meetings were revived and the Club met in Pittsburgh together with the A.A.A.S. Attendance at the meetings had slowly increased until at Minneapolis in 1940, 353 people attended (273 from Minnesota). In 1941 at Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, 174 (a record high) people attended the annual banquet. The increased attendance at meetings came about with the increased attendance of younger people and with the increased participation of professionals. This in turn reflected the gradual evolution of the subject matter of the papers away from simple faunistics to the newer phases of ornithology.

The 50th Anniversary meeting was held at Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1938 and there was no co-host society. From this time until recent years, meetings were held independent of other major organizations. The time of meetings was still the weekend after Thanksgiving. In 1939 this led to some difficulty. The meeting was scheduled for December 1 and 2 in Louisville, Kentucky. In the late summer President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that Thanksgiving would be moved from November 30 to November 23. In September the Club officials hastily advanced the date of the meeting, which was then held in Louisville on November 24–25, although the host state was one of the few which did not go along with the President's change. In conjunction with the 50th anniversary, a history of the Club was written by one of the founders, R. M. Strong (1939).

With the coming of World War II, the 1941 meeting was the last one held for several years. The officers and Council conducted necessary business by mail during the interval.

The Wilson Bulletin also showed growth and change during this period. The content of the papers, as with those given at the meetings, was evolving as scientific ornithology evolved. Emphasis was still on field studies, but such noteworthy papers as H. W. Hann's life history of the Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) (1937), which occupied a whole issue, reached new dimensions in importance. Faunal lists still appeared, but now they were reports from little-known areas, such as the paper by Sutton and Thomas Burleigh on the birds of Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosi (1940). The first of a series of color field sketches of Mexican birds by Sutton accompanied this paper. In 1938 the Sutton drawing on the cover of *The Wilson Bulletin* was removed. A storm of protests came from the membership and the drawing returned the next year.

A watershed for *The Wilson Bulletin* was reached in 1939 when Josselyn Van Tyne of the University of Michigan, a scientist of exceedingly high standards, became editor. Under his leadership the caliber of papers in *The Wilson Bulletin* increased. Van Tyne was a prodigious worker who

insisted that authors meet his own high standards. His austere and somewhat stern appearance, coupled with his six-foot-eight-inch height, may have frightened some people, but he was a man with a penetrating sense of humor. If he approved of your work (and if you did things his way), he could be a fast friend. Many authors owed a part of their reputation as writers to his stern editing. On the other hand there were confrontations with such strong-minded authors as A. W. Schorger and Margaret Nice. Once Van Tyne had the temerity to eliminate two paragraphs from one of Mrs. Nice's papers. Incensed, she promptly published the paragraphs in question in *The Auk* (M. Brooks, pers. comm.).

1944–1955

This period started in the heart of World War II. Travel was too limited to hold meetings and none was held during 1942, 1943, 1944, or 1945. The Articles of Incorporation required annual meetings, and so abortive attempts were made to gather a quorum of the Executive Council for such meetings. Finally in the summer of 1944 a quorum gathered at the Franz Theodore Stone Laboratory at Put-in-Bay, Ohio, and then again in the fall of 1945 another meeting was held in Columbus, Ohio. President George Sutton had resigned in mid-1943 to enter the Army and was succeeded by Vice-President S. C. Kendeigh. Many other members were also in the military and these people were stationed all over the world. Secretary Maurice Brooks was the middleman in a communications network that put servicemen members in touch with like-minded people wherever they might be stationed. Maurice Brooks (President 1950–52) of West Virginia, a professional biologist and ecologist, has served on the Council since 1942 and continues to make contributions.

Membership held constant or slightly increased during this period and in 1946 the Club boasted 1300 members. With the end of hostilities, the absent members returned home, including President Sutton who resumed office in 1946. When the plight of many foreign ornithologists came to the attention of Americans, an organized campaign led by Margaret Nice, Frances Hamerstrom, Theodora Melone, and Joseph Hickey sent clothing and books to needy families abroad. At the banquet of the 1947 meeting, an auction of bird paintings raised money for this project. Over 3000 packages were sent. A revised Constitution was adopted in 1946 and the Club entered a prosperous period of growth.

Annual meetings were resumed in the fall of 1946 at Omaha. The guest speaker at this meeting was Niko Tinbergen, Nobel-Laureate-to-be, who not only spoke of his basic ethological research, but also told of the plight of the Dutch ornithologists during the war. At the 1947 meeting in Columbus, a new award, the Louis Agassiz Fuertes Award, to support the

research of a young bird student, was made for the first time. The recipient was L. R. Mewaldt. This award has continued to the present time as the most prestigious award the Society has to give to students.

At the 1947 meeting the momentous decision to hold future meetings in the spring was taken. As a result, no meeting was held during the calendar year of 1948, but the University of Wisconsin, as part of its Centennial Celebration, hosted a meeting in April 1949. All further meetings have been held in the spring or in early June. The 1950 meeting also departed from precedent when, at the urging of Vice-President Maurice Brooks, it was held in informal surroundings at a 4-H camp, Jackson's Mill, West Virginia. This innovation proved popular and many other meetings have been held in rural settings.

The papers given at the meetings continued to improve in caliber. Immediately after the war many returned servicemen reported on the birds of distant places. Such reports included Fred Hall's report of the rediscovery of the Cahow (*Pterodroma cahow*). In this period two papers given at meetings of the Club have had more than casual importance. At Madison in 1949 Robert McCabe and Harold Deutsch (a chemist) gave a paper on the difference in the electrophoretic patterns of the egg albumins of different species of birds. In the audience that day was C. G. Sibley, who went on to develop the chemical-based taxonomy which has occupied him for so many years. At the 1953 meeting at Douglas Lake, Michigan, Donald Borror and Carl Reese gave the first paper on the analysis of bird song recordings by the sound spectrograph. Neither author could attend the meeting, and the paper was presented on tape!

Editor Van Tyne was able to keep *The Wilson Bulletin* going during the war years, although both the declining number of papers submitted and the restrictions of wartime publication limited the size. In the immediate post-war years two important papers were published. Ernst Mayr's "History of North American Bird Fauna" (1946) may be the most cited paper ever published in *The Wilson Bulletin*. Niko Tinbergen's "Social Releasers and the Experimental Method Required for Their Study" (1948) was a seminal paper for avian ethology in this country. By the time Van Tyne retired from the editorship in 1948, *The Wilson Bulletin* was a journal of the highest standards. According to Ernst Mayr (1975), during this period it was the leading bird journal in the country.

In 1949 the new editor, David E. Davis, made his debut in a storm of protest. By custom, *The Wilson Bulletin* was printed in the home city of the editor. Because of the nature of his equipment, the new printer reduced the height and width of *The Wilson Bulletin* by a half inch each. The membership reacted in a highly negative fashion and in 1950 the journal returned to its former size. Davis found it necessary to give up the edi-

torship in mid-1950 and in this emergency George Sutton volunteered to be interim editor. Sutton's successor was H. B. Tordoff, then at the University of Kansas. Following custom he took the printing of *The Wilson Bulletin* to a small local printer, Harold Allen. From this beginning grew a major enterprise, The Allen Press of Lawrence, Kansas, which is now one of the foremost printers of biological and other scientific journals in the country.

By the end of this period the organization was gradually changing to more of a professional society. Growth continued to be steady. By 1954, 1700 members were on the rolls. *The Wilson Bulletin* remained a journal of the highest quality, and the papers published were at the leading edge of the science. More and more professionals joined the Club, although serious amateurs still constituted the majority of members. This trend was recognized in 1955 when it was voted to change the name of the Wilson Ornithological Club to the Wilson Ornithological Society. The name change was largely a matter of form and, despite the growth of the membership and the increased number attending the annual meeting, the atmosphere of friendliness still prevailed. The annual meetings were as much times of fun and comradeship as they were times of learning.