

## SPECIAL REVIEW

### AN ORNITHOLOGICAL TREASURE AWAITS RESURRECTION

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**American bird names/their histories and meanings.**—Waldo Lee McAtee. Unpublished, 1,697 manuscript pages + 90 file drawers of 2" × 5" cards, currently in the John M. Olin Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.—Shortly after the turn of the century there came to Washington, D. C. from the University of Indiana a young man imbued with the ideals of a dedicated naturalist and equipped with a keen mentality that was both thorough and highly inquisitorial on matters not generally understood. Among his varied interests was a wholesome curiosity regarding the origin and significance of the common names applied to North American birds.

Four decades later that concept had broadened and a manuscript embodying its elements was in the making. That compilation, even in its adolescent form, attracted attention to the point where its publication was considered, and Senator Frederick C. Walcott, an ardent conservationist and an alumnus of Yale University, negotiated with that University for its printing. But when Mitford M. Mathews (the distinguished lexicographer, then preparing a concise version of the "Dictionary of Americanisms") examined the material in 1944 he remarked candidly, "this is too good for Yale," and forthwith undertook a proposal for its publication by the University of Chicago Press.

The young man from Indiana was, of course, the late Waldo Lee McAtee, who had a long and distinguished career in the former Biological Survey and its successor, the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior (see "In Memoriam, W. L. McAtee," *Auk*, 80: 474–485, 1963). The manuscript in question eventually bore the title given above. Something of its origin, history, and scope, and how it came to repose safely, but still unpublished, in the Rare Book Room of the John M. Olin Library at Cornell University, is told below partly for the record, even more in hopes of renewing interest in its publication.

In introductory comments on his manuscript McAtee observed "the lure that drew me to the task was the novelty of folklore nomenclature. Experiences in coastal North Carolina with its distinct dialect, including word survivals from the English of hundreds of years ago, and in lower Louisiana with its fascinating Acadian-French speech, embarked me on a study of vernacular names of both animals and plants which, thereafter, never wholly ceased." And he added "as a class folk names impress one as being genuine and significant, and often they have remarkable appeal in aptness, quaintness, or humor. In the mass of bird nomenclature they are certainly 'the leaven that leaveneth the whole.'"

The venture became both a personal and a semiofficial enterprise when McAtee joined the old Bureau of Biological Survey of the U. S. Department of Agriculture in 1907, and he pursued it intermittently for the next 40 years. The culminating effort involved a period of 5 years near the close of his tenure in government service during which, aided by an efficient secretary, he was able to complete the textual portion of this monumental work (minus the extensive indexes).

In his manuscript McAtee wrote apologetically that "this compilation must be taken as what one man with generous assistance from varied sources was

able to compile. . . . No one is more conscious of its shortcomings than the compiler, yet he can also state that the gathering is more extensive and more exhaustive than any heretofore published for a comparatively large part of the world."

As early as 1911 McAtee published an article in *Forest and Stream* (77: 172-174, 196-197) entitled "Local names of waterfowl and other birds," in which he gave common names for 96 species, 61 of them game birds. Gathered mainly in the southern states during his field studies on the food habits of waterfowl, these names were largely additional to those Trumbull had recorded in his "Names and portraits of birds" (1888). Supplementing the foregoing was a paper, "Some local names of birds" McAtee published in *The Wilson Bulletin* (99: 74-95, 1917). In 1919 he announced formally that he had undertaken the preparation of a dictionary of the vernacular names of birds, his main purpose in so doing being to learn "whether the field was clear" to avoid more than one individual covering the same ground.

In 1923 the U. S. Department of Agriculture published under McAtee's authorship *Miscellaneous Circular No. 13*, "Local names of migratory game birds." This 95-page document met an increasing demand for such information in law-enforcement matters created by the recently enacted *Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada*. In 1941 McAtee spent 3½ months in Montreal, Canada, sponsored by the Fish and Wildlife Service, gleaning bird names from the incomparable resources at McGill University, especially those in the *Blacker Library of Zoology* and the *Emma Shearer Library of Ornithology*. Much of this material had been assembled by the late Casey A. Wood. Still later McAtee compiled a well-documented article, "Longevity of bird names" (*Names*, 1: 85-102, 1953), as well as several of local application including one on "Carolina bird names" that appeared in three installments in *The Chat* (Sep., Dec., 1954 and March, 1955).

Steps taken by Mitford M. Mathews eventually led to a formal agreement between the University of Chicago Press and the Fish and Wildlife Service for publication of the manuscript. At that time (1945) the Federal agency was headquartered in Chicago during the period of war emergency. This facilitated negotiations, and arrangements were made to house the project on the University campus. Pending unforeseeable delays, its completion was expected within 3 years. McAtee's primary responsibility during the final years of his governmental service was the completion of the manuscript and, even after his retirement in 1947, he remained with the project as a matter of personal interest.

With printing costs rising steadily, the Press found it increasingly difficult to foresee sources of financial aid for publishing the manuscript. At the same time curtailment of appropriated funds in the Fish and Wildlife Service prevented allotments for typing still to be done on the manuscript indexes. Accordingly on McAtee's recommendation and with the approval of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the manuscript and its extensive supporting files were transferred to Cornell University and placed in the immediate charge of its strong *Laboratory of Ornithology*.

Near the close of the active program in Chicago the Press printed, apparently in 1949, a four-page prospectus giving a brief history of the project and a suggested form of presentation under the title "A dictionary of American birds." The Press retained the typescript for Volume 1 at the University of Chicago until 1956 or 1957 to facilitate completion of Dr. Mathew's work on the "Dic-

tionary of Americanisms," in which McAtee cooperated through the use of his library of related subject matter. At Cornell the card files were housed originally in the Louis Agassiz Reading Room in Fernow Hall on the campus, but were later moved to the Rare Book Room in the John M. Olin Library.

The work covers the region dealt with in the 4th edition of the A.O.U. "Check-List of North American birds" (1931), which includes all of North America north of the Mexican boundary, the arctic islands, Greenland, Bermuda, and, as a special case, Lower California. The species are those of authentic occurrence or established residence and a few introduced birds, now colonized. The appearance of the 5th edition of the Check-list in 1957 quite naturally calls for some re-examination in any current appraisal of the work. Fortunately the 5th edition makes no change in the areas covered, but the text will have to be scrutinized for changes in ranges and nomenclature, which should be neither difficult nor overly time-consuming.

The original plan was to publish the McAtee manuscript in two volumes. Volume 1 was to list the vernacular names under each species arranged in Check-list sequence. Under each species the common names are grouped in categories designated as "catalogue," "book," and "folk" names, and also those from languages other than English applied to North American birds. Localities where names were used and citations of literature records are included. There are, for instance, 278 appellations for the Canada Goose, including 112 folk terms, and 210 for the Ruddy Duck, of which 156 came from folk sources. The Ovenbird has 149 citations listed under several languages, the flicker some 305.

"Catalogue names" include those used in check-lists by leading authorities from Baird's "Catalogue of North American birds" (1858) through all the editions of A.O.U. Check-lists. "Book names" include all other names published in the English language not necessarily known to be used by people, while "Folk names" are those for which satisfactory evidence exists of popular usage, past or present. "Other language names" include both book and folk names and are listed alphabetically under each species. Indian and Eskimo names are excluded except where modified and used by Caucasians. The only names from languages not using the Roman alphabet are a few transliterated from the Russian. McAtee mentions that such groups as the French of Louisiana and Quebec and the Palatinate Germans of Pennsylvania provided source material rich in vernacular names, also groups such as the Gaels, Welsh, Danes, Swedes, and Finns. English settlers of different strains and backgrounds in various parts of the United States and Canada all contributed to the lists.

Volume 1 embraces 1697 typed manuscript pages! Of these 87 are devoted to literature cited, a compilation prepared by McAtee's secretary, Florence H. Warnick, and listing something more than 2,000 sources of data. The substance of Volume 2 is in the extensive card file on which the text is based, and which is still not in typed form, thanks to the interruption of the project in 1949. Two indexes are here involved, an extensively annotated glossarial one and an intermediate one for use by nonornithologists who might want further information on some bird located, in Check-list order, in Volume 1.

In further explanation of the glossarial index McAtee stated in his manuscript that "this division of the work gathers the names in alphabetical series, notes variations in spelling present in our material, and gives information on derivation and meaning of many of the terms, not repeating, as a rule, however, data of that nature in general dictionaries. So far as feasible translations of

foreign language expressions are given. . . Many of the entries are labeled 'sonic,' indicating that they are based on a sound made by the bird. There is no point in translating foreign sonic terms as the sound, not the meaning, is significant."

At present this information is recorded on about 158,000 2" × 5" slips and 4,100 bibliography cards in 90 file drawers. It has been estimated that, with duplicates eliminated, the glossarial index alone will list some 67,000 citations! Its typing by a careful worker might be a 2-year task, to be followed by proof-reading in which every letter in every word will have to be scrutinized. This McAtee had hoped to do himself, and he certainly would have, had the project been completed in his lifetime. The necessity of this is evident from the fact that about 20 per cent of the typescript will involve foreign languages, of which at least 15 appear in the text. In addition, most of the thousands of index records bear some explanatory note in McAtee's handwriting. With usually more than one, and often many names to a slip, McAtee estimated the grand total of names handled, not deducting duplicates, to be about half a million.

While the inception and the maintained impetus that resulted in the assembling of this mass of information lay in the author's unflagging interest and enthusiasm, nevertheless McAtee generously acknowledged the support and tangible assistance of the Biological Survey and its successor, the Fish and Wildlife Service. In his manuscript he stated "the executive who showed most interest in the work and gave it essential support at critical times was Ira Noel Gabrielson, Chief of the Biological Survey, 1935-1940, and Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, 1940-1945." With equal candor he recognized the mutual interest of M. M. Mathews in linguistics and his efforts to further the project at the University of Chicago Press.

Nearing the close of his task McAtee admitted that, "large as it is, the collection is by no means complete. So far as the work rests upon published sources, exhaustive compilation would be a longtime job for a group of readers and certainly more than one individual could accomplish in a lifetime. Moreover, the rarity of some of the works that should be examined is so great that no one person, or even no practical-sized committee could ever succeed in seeing all of them."

To recapitulate briefly: A monumental manuscript on the vernacular names of North American birds has been prepared thoroughly by the one man eminently fitted for the task. This he accomplished under sponsorship of the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior. Agreement for its publication was effected with the University of Chicago Press, but unforeseen financial stringencies involving both the Service and the Press interrupted the project two decades ago. Since then the manuscript and all pertinent records have been deposited in adequate and safe storage at Cornell University. There they await, hopefully in the minds of many, the resumption of plans for publication.