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ROBERT RIDGWAY

1850-1929

BY

ALEXANDER WETMORE

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Robert Ridgway.

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Robert Ridgway, member of the National Academy of Science, for many years Curator of Birds in the United States National Museum, was born at Mount Carmel, Illinois, on July 2, 1850. His death came on March 25, 1929, at his home in Olney, Illinois.[1]

The ancestry of Robert Ridgway traces back to Richard Ridgway of Wallingford, Berkshire, England, who with his family came to America in January, 1679, as a member of William Penn's Colony, to locate at Burlington, New Jersey. In a short time he removed to Crewcorne, Falls Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he engaged in farming and cattle raising. David Ridgway, father of Robert, was born March 11, 1819, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. During his infancy his family removed for a time to Mansfield, Ohio, later, about 1840, settling near Mount Carmel, Illinois, then considered the rising city of the west through its prominence as a shipping center on the Wabash River.

Little is known of the maternal ancestry of Robert Ridgway except that his mother's family emigrated from New Jersey to Mansfield, Ohio, where Robert's mother, Henrietta James Reed, was born in 1833, and then removed in 1838 to Calhoun Prairie, Wabash County, Illinois. Here David Ridgway was married on August 30, 1849.

Robert Ridgway was the eldest of ten children. For a time his father's business in Mount Carmel prospered, but too generous extension of credit, a fire that destroyed his pharmacy, and a tornado in 1877 that partially demolished the rebuilt structure, brought financial reverses of such extent that, in 1877, he moved to a farm at Wheatland, Indiana. Later Robert Ridgway through savings from his employment in the Smithsonian In-

[1] An article by Harry Harris, entitled Robert Ridgway, with a Bibliography of his published writings, published in the Condor, Vol. 30, January, 1928, pp. 5-118, with numerous illustrations, has been of great assistance in the preparation of the present biography.

stitution purchased for his parents a more comfortable home at Olney, Illinois, where his father died on January 4, 1885, and his mother on December 14, 1886.

With parents interested in all living things outdoors, and a father with particular knowledge of birds for his period, it is not surprising that Robert Ridgway was early drawn to the studies in natural history that were to become his work in life. At this early day with the region only newly opened for settlement wild turkeys were found in numbers, the passenger pigeon, now extinct, abounded, and game of all kinds was abundant. Robert made frequent hunting trips with his father, armed with a muzzle loading shotgun made for him by an indulgent parent from a rusted rifle recovered from the sunken wreck of a river steamer, and as he grew older made many excursions alone. For ammunition the boy compounded his own gunpowder in his father's pharmacy. The art of taxidermy was unknown in this region, and Robert had only colored sketches as means to preserve for future examination representations of his birds. Aptitude in drawing was developed early, as his first sketches, still preserved, were made before he was four years of age. His drawing improved rapidly, and by the time he had reached his 'teens he had developed the discriminating eye for hue and form that marked his later, more practised work. His colors, like his gunpowder, he mixed himself with the resources of his father's pharmacy.

At this early period Ridgway supposed that no one else could be interested in birds. Through a few books—Goldsmith's "Animated Nature" with one volume devoted to birds, a History of the United States with a few pages on birds, and Goodrich's "The Animal Kingdom Illustrated" purchased for him at some sacrifice by his mother—he had learned of the work of Audubon, Wilson, Bonaparte and Nuttall, but believed that there were no living ornithologists.

Names for the birds that Ridgway observed and drew were a problem that was solved when the mother of one of his boyhood friends, Lucien Turner, later well known as a naturalist, suggested that he write to the Commissioner of Patents in Washington sending a drawing whose identity was a subject of discussion among the boys to see if the name of the bird depicted could

be ascertained. To this letter there came a reply from Spencer Fullerton Baird, then Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, identifying the bird as the purple finch. This letter, dated June 23, 1864, was the beginning of Ridgway's contact with the Institution that he served so long. In subsequent correspondence Baird encouraged the young student to draw birds and mammals, to keep careful records of his observations, and to prepare skins and eggs. The young student showed such ready aptitude and progressed so rapidly that in the spring of 1867, when but seventeen years of age, through Baird he was appointed zoologist under Clarence King engaged in the Geological Survey of the Fortieth Parallel. After two weeks spent at the Smithsonian in Washington, Ridgway continued to New York where he joined the party that he was to accompany for the next two years. They proceeded by steamer to Panama, crossed the Isthmus, and then took boat for San Francisco arriving early in June. Field work began at Sacramento and continued east to Salt Lake City and the Uinta Mountains. In the fall of 1868 the party returned to Washington, and the summer of 1869 saw a continuation of this work in the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains.

On completion of this field experience Ridgway was engaged under Professor Baird to prepare the technical descriptions and some of the drawings for the great work on the birds of North America then under preparation jointly by Baird and Dr. Thomas M. Brewer of Boston. In 1874 he was assigned regularly to the Smithsonian Institution as ornithologist, and continued in that service until his death. Baird at this time becoming more and more engrossed in administrative details, assisted Ridgway in every way that he might to enable him to devote his attention uninterruptedly to the study of birds. With such efficient tutoring the development of the student was rapid so that immediately he was recognized as an authority on his subject. His work centered principally on American birds, and eventually led to the eight volumes on the Birds of North and Middle America published as Bulletin 50 of the U. S. National Museum between 1901 and 1919, with two more volumes in preparation at the time of the author's death. The technical information contained

in this work is exhaustive in its field and is basic for all similar studies of the present day.

In the early days of Ridgway's first work in Washington the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution lived in the Smithsonian building, and a number of the workers, Ridgway among them, had living quarters assigned to them in various tower rooms. Here the subject of this biography was associated with other young naturalists who had connection with the Smithsonian, among whom were included W. H. Dall, Theodore N. Gill, Henry M. Bannister and José Zeledon. Others who worked more or less regularly on the collections at this time included Elliott Coues, H. C. Yarrow, C. Hart Merriam, Henry W. Henshaw and J. H. Kidder to mention only a few.

On October 12, 1875, Ridgway married Julia Evelyn Perkins, daughter of one of the engravers who had prepared the blocks for the illustrations for the History of North American Birds. To them was born one son, Audubon Wheelock, on May 15, 1877. This only child was interested like his father in the study of birds. Shortly after taking a position as assistant to Charles B. Cory, Curator of Zoology in the Field Museum in Chicago, Audubon Ridgway contracted pneumonia and died on February 22, 1901. From this shock Mrs. Ridgway never fully recovered and finally broke in health completely in 1921. Her death came in 1927.

Ridgway's first work in Washington was, as has been indicated, on an unofficial basis when he was employed by the publishers of the History of North American Birds of which he was joint author with Baird and Brewer. His official connection under the Smithsonian Institution began in 1874. In the annual report of the Smithsonian for that year he is listed as "Ornithologist." In 1875 his name is included as "In Charge of Ornithological Division." In 1877 he is indicated as "Assistant, Ornithology" and in 1880 as "Curator, Ornithology." The following year this is modified to "Curator, Department of Ornithology" and in 1883 to "Curator, Department of Birds." Personnel records of the National Museum indicate him as "Curator of Birds" in 1886, which title he held to the time of his death.

Mention has been made of the necessity for the manufacture of his own paints for his early drawings of birds from materials in his father's drug store. His later work in bird portraiture, with his written work in which he prepared detailed descriptions of birds in his various accounts of new forms, and other studies, brought definitely to his attention the need for a uniform series of named colors and the standardization of color names so that there might be no uncertainty as to the colors indicated in written terminology. This need found expression in his work on the Nomenclature of Colors for Naturalists and Compendium of Useful Knowledge for Ornithologists, published by Little, Brown and Co., in 1886. This work contained ten plates on which in small rectangles there were shown 186 named colors. The value of this contribution was at once recognized so that it became immediately a standard among naturalists, particularly among ornithologists, who with its aid were able to designate definitely for the first time the various shades that they used in their descriptions.

With this as a beginning Ridgway continued his studies of color on a more scientific basis, using in his experiments the color wheel and Maxwell disks. With the spectrum colors as a base he mixed two or three fixed colors in definite percentages by which he worked out a series of named colors that could be duplicated at any time. This procedure was of importance due to the fading of plates such as those produced in his first work on color and the subsequent change in value of the various color tones depicted. After prolonged effort extending through a period of many years he produced in 1912 a new and enlarged work entitled Color Standards and Color Nomenclature with 53 plates showing in small rectangles 1115 named colors. The plates were accompanied by tables giving the precise proportions of each mixture for each color. This work, published in an edition of 5000 copies by A. Hoen and Co., of Baltimore, Maryland, at once came into general use not only among naturalists but also among florists, manufacturers of paints, chemicals, wall papers and a variety of other industries. To insure absolute uniformity each color was produced at one time in sufficient quantity for the entire edition. This work is still in demand.

When Ridgway first came to Washington the scientific activities of the Smithsonian Institution were housed in the Smithsonian building, the only permanent structure in the Smithsonian park at that time. The bird collection when he first saw it in 1867 was on the first floor of the east wing, the living quarters of the Secretary being directly above. The smaller bird skins were kept in pasteboard boxes in tin herbarium cases, and the larger ones in glass-topped drawers in walnut cabinets. The offices were located in the section that connects the east wing with the main hall. Mounted specimens, more or less injured by water during the fire of 1865, were exhibited in the main hall.

About 1869 the collections were transferred to the middle room on the second floor of the North Tower adjacent to Professor Baird's office. Large specimens for which there was no room here were stored in cases and chests in the west basement. Ridgway had living quarters on the top floor of the south tower. About 1875 the former storage cabinets were replaced by what were known as "Salvin" boxes, with the skins in drawers. Some time after 1880 the present system of quarter-unit and half-unit cases provided with sliding trays was adopted, giving much greater facility in the handling of specimens. The smaller skins for a time were in the higher rooms of the South Tower, and then were transferred to the southwest gallery of the main hall, where they remained until brought into the Natural History Building in August, 1909.

Though with little taste for travel Ridgway made several trips for specimens for the Smithsonian. Three of these expeditions were to Florida. In February, 1895, he went with E. J. Brown and William Palmer to the Kissimmee region. In 1896 he was near Lake Okeechobee where he collected the Carolina paroquet. The following year he visited Fort Myer, and from there went up the Caloosahatchie River to Lake Flirt and Lake Trafford, and on into the Big Cypress where he obtained the ivory-billed woodpecker. When the Harriman expedition to Alaska was organized in 1899 Ridgway was invited to accompany the party and on this trip was absent from Washington from May 31 to July 30. Though he was successful in obtaining material for use in his work on North American birds he did

not enjoy the journey, confessing that he had little love for the North.

Two trips were made to Costa Rica, the first from December 8, 1904, to May 27, 1905, and the second from February 7 to May 8, 1908, both trips being planned to secure material lacking in the National Museum for his systematic studies of birds. Since a brief view in 1867 while en route through Panama to San Francisco it had been Ridgway's desire to study the life of a Tropical region. Through the assistance of Señor Don José C. Zeledón and Señor Don Anastasio Alfaro his work was rendered most effective, and excellent series of finely prepared specimens were obtained that were of great assistance to him in his writing.

The written contributions of Robert Ridgway to science are remarkable for the fact that there are among his early papers practically none of the amateur writings marking the enthusiasm of youthful observation before judgment of values has become mature and stable, that are found in the early years of most similar bibliographies. Under the wise counsel of Professor Baird, Ridgway on his return from the field for the Wheeler Survey embarked at once on the careful studies of birds and their relationship to one another, that continued throughout his entire life. His bibliography begins in 1869 with a few observations on the nesting of the belted kingfisher, and his second title, Notices of certain obscurely known species of American Birds, includes a critical review of certain thrushes and the grackles and description of some tanagers. In 1870 he published a classification of the North American hawks, a contribution that today contains much that is worthy of consideration despite the sixty years that have elapsed since its appearance. As has been noted on a previous page he was engaged at this time in preparing the technical descriptions for the History of North American Birds of which the three volumes on the land birds appeared in 1874. In 1877 there appeared his report on the ornithology of the Wheeler Survey, a work of more than three hundred quarto pages, in 1880 and 1881 his list of the birds of North America, and in 1884 the two volumes on the water birds of North America written in collaboration with Baird and Brewer for which Ridgway furnished the technical descriptions. His Manual of North

American Birds, a key to the identification of all known forms, appeared in 1887. The works mentioned have been those of major importance. Throughout this entire period there appeared constantly descriptions of new forms, comments on current ornithological questions, brief observations in botany, in herpetology, and in other branches of science, as well as longer papers dealing with detailed accounts of various collections that came to the Smithsonian Institution.

On the formation of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1883, Ridgway was naturally included among the twenty-three founders, and was elected one of the vice-presidents. He was also included in the membership of the committee entrusted with the task of preparation of an official check-list of North American birds. This volume appeared in 1886 after prolonged labor by the committee, in which Ridgway, due to his great familiarity with the subject, took a most effective part. The list when it appeared embodied what were then the modern ideas of the American school in the use of trinomial Latin names to designate geographic races, a logical procedure that aroused a storm of protest abroad where these forms were given the same binomial status as distinct species so that without special knowledge it was not practicable to distinguish between forms in these two categories. There was also included a code of nomenclature where definite rules of procedure for the adoption and use of scientific names were clearly and concisely set forth. In the preparation of the list in particular the clear and certain judgment and experience of Ridgway had a leading part. It may be remarked that the basic procedure outlined at this time has been continued to the present day, foreign workers in ornithology, having come gradually to the adoption of American methods as regards trinomials, while the code of nomenclature has been largely the basis for the preparation of an International Code covering scientific names in all branches of zoology.

Though Ridgway worked to some extent on birds of the Old World his efforts were centered principally on the avifauna of the Americas, particularly on North America, and Central America north of Panama. Preliminary work on a systematic catalog of the bird-life of this vast area began sometime after

1880, and notes were accumulated steadily until in 1894 Ridgway was directed by G. Brown Goode, then Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, to make his principal official task the preparation of such a report. For this he was freed from administrative routine as much as possible, the burden of this being assumed by Dr. Charles W. Richmond who gradually relieved Ridgway until finally he had his entire time free for research and writing. In a task of this magnitude the ordinary official hours of labor from nine a. m. to four thirty p. m. meant little, and Ridgway worked early and late at a seemingly endless task. With removal of the bird collections to more commodious quarters in the Natural History Building he had at his command more spacious office and laboratory rooms, but with the growth of the Museum and increased interest in science everywhere he found the constant interruptions from friendly visitors more and more irksome in the delay that they occasioned in his task, so that he did much of his writing at home, coming to the Museum only to examine specimens. Attachment to the region where he had spent his childhood was an outstanding characteristic of the man, and in 1916 he removed to Olney, Illinois, where eventually he acquired two properties, the first a tract of eighteen acres located in the country, which he called Bird Haven, and which he developed as a bird sanctuary. Mrs. Ridgway's health was such that it was not advisable to live remote from town so that he obtained a home in the outskirts of Olney, which he called Larchmound, where he lived until his death, making regular visits however to Bird Haven and improving the grounds there as opportunity presented. In this seclusion he continued steadily at his task of writing, producing the eighth volume of his Birds of North and Middle America in 1919. With increasing age it became necessary for him to conserve his strength, and it was no longer possible for him to work the long hours each day that had been his custom. In the following years he frequently expressed a wish to retire, influenced in part by failing eyesight, and at one time made definite application for retirement but at my own urgent request was prevailed upon to continue. While there was realization that in all probability he would not see his

task completed it was highly desirable for the advance of science to obtain from him as much as possible of the results of his long years of study and observation. To this end he continued work on the last two volumes of the series, working particularly on the diagnoses of genera, families, and other higher groups.

As a worker of the older school Ridgway's writing was all in long hand, prepared carefully, with any corrections and interlineations required made with meticulous care. His manuscripts were completed in so legible and accurate a condition that they were given to the printer without necessity of being typewritten, being set in type directly from the long hand copy. To assist in his work thousands of specimens were measured for him by Mr. J. H. Riley and others, and Mr. Riley assisted also in compiling references for the synonymies given under each species. To Dr. Charles W. Richmond, Ridgway also owed much for careful and painstaking aid in the reading of proofs, a tedious task in which Dr. Richmond through long training has become particularly adept, aided especially through his comprehensive and exact knowledge of ornithological literature. The accuracy of the references in the completed volumes of Bulletin 50 owe much to this aid.

As recreation from his literary labors Ridgway chose horticulture and was particularly expert in his knowledge of trees and shrubs. Under his careful tending the grounds at Larchmound were landscaped with such skill and understanding that they attracted much attention, so much so that Ridgway was solicited by others for aid in developing estates. A number of papers dealing with the woody plants of his region were published.

Under such conditions Ridgway lived during the last years of his life. The death of Mrs. Ridgway in May 24, 1927, after fifty-two years of wedded life naturally affected Ridgway measurably. A widowed sister, Mrs. Lida R. Palmatier, came from California to take charge of Larchmound, and Ridgway continued his writing and his interest in the maintenance of his favored birds and shrubs until a few hours before his death on March 25, 1929, in his seventy-ninth year.

The rapidity with which Ridgway advanced from an unknown youth to one of the chief authorities on North American birds seems at this distant day almost incredible, particularly when it is recalled that he had no prolonged period of preliminary training but entered at once as a mere boy upon a definite program of constructive and serious research. His voluminous writings form the most important contribution to systematic ornithology as regards American birds of his day, as they are the basis of much of the work of his colleagues in the same field. As a young man he developed under the instruction of Baird the modern methods of research that prevail today, and was therefore, a pioneer in his field.

Friendly, but unassuming in personality, Ridgway made many friends, and was on the most cordial terms with his colleagues. Throughout this quiet popularity he had no desire for the public eye and avoided on every occasion anything that might draw to him undue attention. He attended few public meetings even of scientific organizations, and though he was elected to offices, particularly in the American Ornithologists' Union, did not participate in the public sessions. His active work for the Union came in the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature where, as has been said, his great experience was used in the building of the official check-list published in 1886, and in the second and third revisions of 1895 and 1910, respectively. His career as a whole gives definite instance of what may be accomplished by constant and persistent effort in one line of scientific endeavor. Generous and kind, he was particularly helpful to beginners, assisting them by word and act. It was natural from the leading place that he played in the ornithological bibliography of his period that Ridgway should be given membership in the leading ornithological societies of the world. In 1920 he was awarded the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal of the National Academy of Sciences, and in 1921 received the William Brewster Medal. He was elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 1926. He was also the recipient of the Walker Grand Prize of the Boston Society of Natural History,

amounting to $1000, granted to him in 1913 particularly for his work on the birds of North and Middle America.

The name of Ridgway has been commemorated by his fellow workers in ornithology by two genera, twenty-three species, and ten sub-species of birds named in his honor. There is further to be mentioned the establishment of Bird Haven, as a permanent sanctuary for birds, a project that was much in the mind of Robert Ridgway during the last few years of his life. Originally a committee representing the American Ornithologists' Union, the Cooper Ornithological Club, and the Wilson Ornithological Club, undertook to raise an endowment, the intention being to secure a trust fund yielding sufficient income so that Ridgway might, if he desired, retire and spend his last years in peaceful quiet at Bird Haven. His death before this goal was reached changed somewhat the scheme. The Women's Clubs of Illinois were interested definitely in this plan which has been made possible finally by the interest of Mrs. Frances K. Hutchinson, who has acquired adjacent property to add to the Bird Haven holdings, and has arranged the necessary additional endowment to insure maintenance in perpetuity. The sanctuary will stand as a concrete memorial to Ridgway's name and to his interest in living birds.

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