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IN MEMORIAM: WALDRON DEWITT MILLER, 1879–1929.[1]

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Plate I.

ABOUT three years ago I was in the sidecar of my old friend Waldron Miller, being driven rapidly from South River to New Brunswick, New Jersey, after a pleasant day looking for Wood Ducks and renewing old memories. We had revisited spots where he led my youthful steps more than twenty years ago. Then Alanson Skinner and I often met Miller at South River or Old Bridge, and wandered off for the day in pine woods and swamps. Toward evening we would bid him good-bye as he bestrode his motorcycle and started home for Plainfield.

In recent years my excursions in New Jersey had become fewer but most of them were in Miller's company, his interest in the region never having diminished. In this highly mechanized age, far distant countries would seem safer than home for on this same road—the familiar route that led to the northern pine barrens—Miller was fatally injured. On August 4, 1929, as he was riding along close to South River he collided with a motor bus and received injuries from which he never rallied. The end came at St. Peter's Hospital in New Brunswick on August 7.

Waldron DeWitt Miller, the elder son of Major William DeWitt Miller and Grace Waldron Miller, was born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 4, 1879. In April of the following year the

[1] Read by title at the Salem and Detroit Meetings of the A. O. U., October 23, 1930 and October 20, 1931.

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family moved to Plainfield, New Jersey. In that favorable locality his love of nature developed early, he had the inborn bent that so often produces the true naturalist. His sisters recall that his first interests as a small boy were in curious stones and in cocoons which he kept indoors so as to watch the moths emerge. Toward the age of ten the study of birds began to attract him, particularly their nesting habits. Among his papers I have found a yellowed clipping from the New York 'Mail and Express' of 1893, a column devoted to the habits of the Wood Pewee, with the notation below: "Written and illustrated by Master Walter [sic] D. W. Miller, aged 14." The author's sketch was probably copied on stippleboard by a newspaper illustrator, but the text is plainly Master Miller's. It not only described the appearance and voice of the bird but also its nest and eggs, and points out, in addition, the distinctions between the nesting of the Wood Pewee and the Phoebe.

About the time of this first publication Waldron Miller left school in Plainfield and attended the Academy in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, for two years. Another clipping from a Plainfield newspaper tells of his return from the East Greenwich Academy: "At the commencement exercises he was awarded the prize for the best herbarium, containing over eighty specimens." This interest in botany was developing side by side with his ornithological tastes. Miss Julia Noll, an accomplished botanist, who was affectionately known as "Auntie" in his family, used to take him on walks and introduce him to the plants with which she was so well acquainted. In later years it is interesting to know that Miller took his aunt on excursions to show her still rarer species.

After graduation from the East Greenwich Academy, Miller lived at Plainfield, and took a position in an insurance office in New York. His natural history studies out-of-doors were not interrupted. Excursions into the country about Plainfield were made at every opportunity, the Watchung Hills and Ash Swamp being favorite stamping grounds; and he used to tell me of youthful cycling trips as far as the Great Swamp west of Chatham.

In his early teens, although not socially inclined, he was in great demand among the young people of his neighborhood who called on him to answer questions relating to birds and flowers, Ernest

Suffern being his particular friend. Together with his aunt Waldron developed a wild-flower garden.

Unlike some of us, who became lovers of birds while collecting specimens, Miller was always respectful of their rights. Many years passed, I believe, before he found it advisable to put a bird to death in order to know it better. Keen sight and hearing, with a will to look ever harder at it, enabled him to overcome difficulties of identification. The works of John Burroughs formed an important item in his early reading and aroused his admiration, but he used to tell with amusement of his disobedience of the injunction in 'Wake-Robin' not to "ogle" birds with a field-glass. On the contrary, Miller continued to stare at live birds, feeling that mere identification was but the beginning of an observation. Then he would watch and listen for peculiarities of form, behavior, and voice. He early began sending in migration schedules to the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club in Philadelphia and in 1900 was elected a Corresponding Member.

About this time he made the acquaintance of William Dutcher, then a resident of Plainfield. Mr. Dutcher recognized the ornithological talent of his young neighbor and introduced him to Dr. Frank M. Chapman through whom Miller was engaged in 1903 as assistant in the Department of Mammalogy and Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Up to this time his studies had dealt mainly with the birds of the eastern states, yet he had read widely, and must have been well informed on general ornithology. To Elliott Coues' books he often referred, and he was a trained man in that he knew how to extend his horizons.

At the Museum he found his opportunity, with collections and library available, under the guidance of Doctors Allen, Chapman and Dwight. Collections were being received from J. H. Batty in Mexico and Panama and from W. B. Richardson in Nicaragua, and Miller was encouraged to work up the birds.

My acquaintance with Waldron Miller began in 1905, and quickly grew into close friendship. Soon I was invited to join him in week-end and holiday excursions, mainly in New Jersey. To the best of my ability I haunted his office, for there I received a veritable course of instruction in systematic ornithology. But there was

outdoor teaching as well. From the bicycle as a means of locomotion he had changed to the more efficient motorcycle, and many times I rode on the rear of the machine from some railway station to a secluded spot where we left the road. Not only birds concerned us. We set mouse traps, rolled over stones and logs for hidden specimens, fished in streams, and I was shown the characteristic plants of each region. Once we went to Delaware and lived like tramps along the Nanticoke River; once we joined William T. Davis in visits to Lakehurst; and again we hunted for cave rats in the hills of northern New Jersey.

During the next couple of years I found part-time employment at the Museum and aided Miller when he rearranged the exhibition collection of mounted birds. As we regrouped the specimens according to the great regions of the earth, wiping dust from glass eyes and perches, Miller would explain to me the intricacies of geographic distribution and family relationships. Much of this I fear was forgotten, but what was retained seemed priceless when Herbert Lang took me to Africa, and how I used to wish that Miller were along with us.

For some years we were separated. And meanwhile others of my friends were receiving similar guidance from him, and he in the meantime was widening his own investigations. He had not only the skins and skeletons in the Museum, but also the birds received in the flesh from the New York Zoological Park. The works of Garrod, Forbes, Nitzsch, Gadow and Beddard were ever at his elbow and not even the "advanced" condition of some of his material could deter him from painstaking examination of all points of interest. What he learned was confided to loose-leaf sheets logically arranged, which are now carefully preserved in the Department of Birds.

Miller's desk radiated a magnetism that drew youthful students seeking assistance in their field identifications, or receiving the expert ornithological instruction which Miller was so happy to give to all comers. He had many other visitors including game-wardens, artists and commercial specialists in color, in addition to professional students of birds, sportsmen and teachers. His colleagues at the Museum found him ever ready to lend assistance and advice in questions of classification, anatomy and pterylography. To me, Miller was truly a professor of ornithology.

In his early years at the Museum he wrote a few systematic papers based on collections received from Mexico. It was planned that he should prepare a report on the birds of Nicaragua and, in 1917, accompanied by Ludlow Griscom, he visited that country to familiarize himself with ecological and distributional conditions. As was to be expected, he returned with a store of information on the habits, local occurrence, relationships and food of the birds which he had seen alive. The work on the report was to be continued with the able collaboration of Mr. Griscom but at the time of Miller's death it was still unfinished and it is fervently to be hoped that Mr. Griscom will carry it to completion.

Miller's interest in faunal reports was weakened by his enthusiasm for gathering evidence useful in classification. With due credit to the great workers of the past, it will be admitted that in this connection an enormous field of detail remains to be explored. Miller did not attempt to make complete dissections of the specimens he was constantly receiving but looked for particular characters, checking his findings with the classical works on the subject and correcting not a few of their statements. Where he was most expert was in pterylography and in the feathering of birds' wings he found a most promising field. First he took up the classification of the kingfishers with highly beneficent results, and later went even more deeply into the grouping of the genera of woodpeckers. He was willing to leave to others the discussions as to earliest names, and preferred to seek the biological and phylogenetic significance of the arrangement of toes, development of tongue, beak and rectrices, and any other characters, external or internal, which he could turn to account. Would that he had lived to publish the interesting results of his labors. But to everyone who shared his interest he generously imparted every piece of information he possessed so the knowledge is by no means lost. Pride of publication was wholly subordinated in his thirst for sound knowledge.

In 1911 Miller was made Assistant Curator and in 1917 Associate Curator of Birds in the American Museum. An Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union since 1896, he was elected a Member in 1906 and a Fellow in 1914. With Dr. Alexander Wetmore he was chosen to draw up the scheme of classification followed in the new 'A. O. U. Check-List.' In 1922 the British Ornithologists' Union elected him to Foreign Membership.

Notwithstanding this specialized work, most of Miller's other interests, far more varied than one might suspect, were kept very much alive. He loved music and in his home delighted in listening to reproductions of the great operas. Botany he pursued as an outdoor study and rivalled professional botanists in his field knowledge of the flora of New Jersey, which was his favorite if not quite his native state. The sedge family in particular attracted him and the plant specimens he preserved have all been presented to the New York Botanic Garden.

After the death of his parents Miller moved to Brooklyn; but his excursions were still mainly devoted to the state of New Jersey. Once in a while I accompanied him, and found no slackening in his enthusiasm or his vigor. Any idea that people may form of a staid curator in a museum would have been rudely upset if they had recognized this rough-clad, often mud-bespattered, rider on the country roads, or met him floundering through his beloved swamps. He seemed tireless and to witness his skill at tree-climbing was a treat. Snakes were among his favorite finds. Few were collected but many measured and released. Rattlesnakes pleased him especially, perhaps because every other man's hand was turned against them, for Miller had a feeling for the under dog. The naturalist, he believed, has a special responsibility in the matter of preserving the existence of as many as possible of his fellow-creatures.

Among Miller's personal friends were several men who found special pleasure in shooting birds of prey. On the one hand, this gave him an opportunity to examine the crop and stomach contents of many birds accused of every manner of evil. On the other hand, he foresaw the possible fate in store for our birds of prey. He watched them hunting and nesting and many an evening he picked apart owl pellets to gather additional evidence, whether for or against. Some will call it intolerance, but after years of study Miller felt most strongly that real danger threatens many of our predacious birds. They had suffered unnecessarily from the emphasis placed on the utility of insectivorous species and of those which possess a gastronomic value to man. If he spoke boldly on the subject, he spoke from the heart and from thorough knowledge.

To me, a comrade in Miller's visits to the nests of hawks and

owls, imbued with the joy of making a peaceful acquaintance with them, sympathy for predatory birds is a deep-rooted emotion. It seems true wisdom to preserve even apparently injurious species from wanton destruction. What moral right has man to decree the extermination of any bird which at worst merely reduces the numbers of some of its fellows? As biologists can we believe that the earth and all its inhabitants exist solely for the benefit of man? Let the farmer protect his live stock whenever necessary, but let us not encourage an ignorant prejudice which takes savage delight in slaughter. Natural checks on overproduction have their uses. It was a noble and fortunate sentiment that determined the choice of the Bald Eagle as our national emblem, rather than the Wild Turkey, or perchance the Mockingbird. These were Miller's feelings.

Anyone who has witnessed the "development" of areas adjacent to our great cities must reflect on the dubious future that awaits even remote sections of our country, especially its wooded areas. Forest preservation also appealed strongly to Miller but here again he looked before he spoke and in 1928 he made an extended trip with Willard G. Van Name through some of the finest forests of our West. Criticism of wrong policies must be made and should be welcomed if these treasures of our continent are truly to be conserved.

Waldron Miller was one of the incorporators of the New Jersey Audubon Society and became its Vice President. He devoted his life not only to the study of creation, but to its preservation for those to come after us. All the riches of our museums, he felt, will be of slight value to posterity as compared with the living animals and plants whose existence we shall have spared.

While Waldron Miller's relatives and friends were gathered to pay him their last respects in Plainfield on August 9, 1929, the notes of a Wood Pewee drifted in from the garden. The subject of his youthful essay was singing a requiem. Would that all of our fellow-vertebrates might survive to brighten the lives of our descendants.

To me, the passing of Miller has meant the loss of one of my dearest friends, a colleague who spared no pains to instruct and assist. His wide circle of ornithological associates will join me in

this sincere expression of our sympathy to his family. He leaves a brother and two sisters: Raymond V. V. Miller, Miss Anne K. Miller and Miss Emma H. Miller.

American Museum of Natural History,
New York.