

Appreciations

S. Dillon Ripley

SECRETARY,
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Alexander Wetmore is so familiar a figure to scientists as the dean of American ornithology that it is difficult to realize that he has been directly associated with the Smithsonian Institution as an administrator since 1924. His first responsibilities were in connection with the National Zoological Park, of which he became Superintendent in 1924. Subsequently, Dr. Wetmore became Assistant Secretary for Science of the Institution and Director of the Museum of Natural History in 1925, and continued as Assistant Secretary until 1945, when he was elected by the Regents to serve as the sixth Secretary, succeeding Dr. Charles G. Abbot, who retired in that year.

Throughout this period, and after his own retirement from administrative responsibilities in 1952, Dr. Wetmore has continued an extraordinarily active career in ornithology. In addition to his many duties with the Smithsonian, he also served as Home Secretary of the National Academy of Sciences from 1951 to 1955 and has been for many years a Trustee and Vice-Chairman of the Research Committee of the National Geographic Society.

Throughout this career his publications on birds have continued in depth and in great volume. Following his retirement he has continued his monographic studies on the birds of Panama, which have culminated in the publication of three volumes of "The Birds of the Republic of Panama" (*Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, volume 150), with a fourth part in preparation. Even now, Dr. Wetmore's work is not completed and he continues to be a productive scientist in the laboratory of the Division of Birds.

In addition to the many research publications on fossil material specializing in birds, Dr. Wetmore is known today as one of the most outstanding systematic specialists. His renowned arrangement of the sequence of higher taxa of birds, "A Classification for the Birds of the World" (*Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, 139 (11):1-37, 1960), still stands virtually unchallenged. He is a winner of the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union, and recently, in May 1975, of the Hubbard Medal of the National Geographic Society.

The amount of materials contributed by him to the collections of the National Museum is monumental. Indeed, present-day ornithologists would be staggered to think of the production of research and study material deposited by Dr. Wetmore in the National Collection: some 26,058 skins from North America, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, the Hawaiian Islands, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, and Central America, with more than half, some 14,291, from Panama alone. Of skeletal and anatomical specimens, Dr. Wetmore has prepared and contributed 4363, an enormously important increment to the anatomy collections in Washington. The majority of these are from North America and Puerto Rico, but nearly 1000 are from Central and South America and 540 from Panama

alone. Of eggs, Dr. Wetmore has collected 201 clutches from North, Central, and South America. In this day and age when the collecting of birds has become markedly diminished due to the general knowledge of specimens in existing museums, as well as the varying directions taken in present-day studies in environment and ecology which tend to preclude such collecting, Dr. Wetmore's collections seem large in retrospect; but they form part of the fundamental resource on which present and future work will depend. The very magnitude of these collections would tend to make further collecting in most areas where he has worked superfluous. So today the specialist in taxonomic studies can be grateful for the efforts of meticulous collectors such as Dr. Wetmore, whose work has laid out in depth representative material. Thus, only highly specific additional collecting need be done in the future in areas where Wetmore's work has given us the foundation of our knowledge.

The number of species and subspecies described by Dr. Wetmore is equally impressive. Over the years since 1914 he has described as new to science some 189 species and subspecies of recent birds. Many of these, in fact most, are from Central and northern South America, but much of Dr. Wetmore's most significant early field work was done in the Caribbean, particularly in Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and adjacent islands in the Greater Antilles. In addition, through the initiative of the late Dr. Casey Wood, Wetmore worked on and described a number of species from the Fiji Islands, as well as forms from other islands of the Pacific. His monographic revisions of a number of species of northern Central and North American birds, as well as Argentinian and southern South American birds, have produced many novelties for science. A great deal of his work was done in revising the avifauna of Venezuela with the late W. H. Phelps, Sr., with whom he co-authored a number of new species and subspecies.

At least one of Dr. Wetmore's discoveries, the population of Chilean Pintail found in the vicinity of Bogotá, Colombia, has subsequently gone extinct, due presumably to hunting pressure. Many of the environments in which he worked in Colombia and adjacent parts of northern South America are already so radically changed that one wonders whether additional forms may not have gone extinct as well. It is a sadness of our time that the development of tropical regions of the world, with the consequent destruction of forests and unique habitats, particularly in South and Central America, has been so rapid that many forms of the accompanying avifauna may never be seen again in life. In a spirit of prescience, Alexander Wetmore was an early supporter of the Pan-American Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation, having joined T. Gilbert Pearson, Robert Cushman Murphy, Marshall McLean, William Vogt, and Hoyes Lloyd in helping to set up the original organization with Latin American colleagues.

Many of his admirers have named numbers of new birds after our beloved former Secretary, among them a long-billed rail of the Venezuelan coast, *Rallus wetmorei*, which I have recently considered in my own ornithological work. Including *Rallus wetmorei*, some 16 modern species and subspecies of birds have been named in honor of Alexander Wetmore, as well as 4 mammals, 7 reptiles and amphibians, 2 fishes, 9 insects, 5 molluscs, a sponge, a cactus, a glacier, and a canopy bridge in the Bayano River forest in Panama. Truly the incessant and intensive zeal which he has single-mindedly given to the study of birds over the years, often at very considerable personal expenditure in time and energy, will mark the career of Alexander Wetmore as one of the most memorable in the entire history of American ornithology.

Jean Delacour

DIRECTOR EMERITUS,
NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

I had been corresponding with Alexander Wetmore for several years before I had a chance to meet him. This I did in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1926. Referring to a visit I made to the National Zoological Park at that time, I wrote as follows:

. . . the National Zoological Park is managed by the Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Alexander Wetmore, one of the youngest and most accomplished naturalists in the United States. Notwithstanding his heavy administrative obligations, Dr. Wetmore finds enough time for study in descriptive ornithology and technical work, and observations of birds in freedom and in captivity, all with remarkable results. I visited the Zoo under his kind guidance. . . . (*L'Oiseau*, 7(1926):205).

Dr. Wetmore himself published in the same issue of that periodical (pages 324–325), a report of the first breeding in captivity at the National Zoo of the Blue Snow Goose, with several photographic plates. He was, therefore, awarded a special medal by the Société Nationale d'Acclimatation de France. Dr. Wetmore was Director of the National Zoo for two years, and before he exchanged that function for the Assistant Secretaryship he was responsible for choosing as his successor, Dr. William Mann, who was an outstanding Zoo director for many years.

The welcome given me by Dr. Wetmore in 1926 remains vivid in my memory, and my mother and I visited Washington under his cordial and competent guidance. Later on, we had many opportunities of getting together at meetings and congresses, as we have had many interests in common. We met in Europe and in America frequently, working together for bird preservation since the inception of the International Council for Bird Preservation. We saw even more of each other after 1940, when I came to live in the United States.

We are now among the few ornithologists of our generation still alive. We sadly miss many of our old friends, particularly Frank Chapman, Tom Barbour, Robert Cushman Murphy, James Chapin and T. Gilbert Pearson, to list only a few who worked with us on different projects. It is to me a very special comfort to know that Alex still is here, looking and acting and writing much as he always has, and I wish him all the happiness he deserves. As past Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution he joins the ranks of those others who have seemed over the years almost immortal; thus his continuing research for many years seems assured.



Alexander Wetmore



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