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ALEXANDER WETMORE

1886—1978

A Biographical Memoir by

S. DILLON RIPLEY AND JAMES A. STEED

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Biographical Memoir

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A. Wetmore

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June 18, 1886–December 7, 1978

BY S. DILLON RIPLEY AND JAMES A. STEED

ALEXANDER WETMORE—destined to become the most distinguished American ornithologist of the nineteen thirties and forties, to serve as the sixth secretary of the Smithsonian, to be a member of the Academy from 1946 to 1978, and its home secretary from 1951 to 1955—was born in North Freedom, Wisconsin, on June 18, 1886. He died at his home in Glen Echo, Maryland, near Washington, on December 7, 1978, of congestive heart failure. He is survived by his second wife, Annie Beatrice Thielen, of Glen Echo, and a daughter, Margaret Fenwick Holland. In his ninety-two years he compiled a remarkable record of service to science, both as an investigator and an administrator. We should like to sum up his career as a scientific administrator, which is less appreciated than it should be; to sketch an outline of his scientific work; and to say something of Wetmore's personal, human side, which was perhaps not well understood even by many who knew him.

PART I

Wetmore spent his early childhood in the small town of North Freedom, the son of Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia (Woodworth) Wetmore. His father was a physician in the tradition of the country doctor, traveling the countryside in

his horse and buggy. His mother kept the home and indulged her bent for reading and study. His parents made his home a place of books and ideas. On graduating from high school, he chose to work his way through the University of Kansas.¹

Wetmore attributed his interest in ornithology to Chapman's *Handbook of Birds in Eastern North America*, which his mother gave him at age five. His first field entry, made in Florida three years later, was an observation of the pelican: "a great big bird that eats fish."² More serious study followed, and in 1900 Wetmore published his first note in *Bird Lore*,³ recording his observation of a red-headed woodpecker. At first, Wetmore had planned to develop his interest in science as a doctor, but once he found he could make a living as a scientist, he changed his plans and concentrated on science directly. Wetmore first worked in the University of Kansas Museum. Then, in 1911, he took leave to serve as an aide to Arthur Cleveland Bent on a trip to the Aleutian Islands for the U.S. Biological Survey. In 1912 Wetmore received his B.A. from Kansas; he later earned an M.A. (1916) and Ph.D. (1920) at George Washington University.⁴

Following graduation from Kansas, Wetmore rejoined the U.S. Biological Survey as a field agent, rising to the posts of assistant biologist in 1913 and biologist in 1924. He studied the food habits of North American birds and had a chance to meet many of the noted biologists of the day, especially those about the Biological Survey and the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. Among others, they included

¹ Alexander Wetmore, "Autobiographical Statement." (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1945), p. 1.

² John Sherwood, "The Museum Life," *The Washington Star*, January 13, 1977, pp. 82-83.

³ Alexander Wetmore, "My Experience With a Red-headed Woodpecker," *Bird Lore*, II (October 1900): 155-56.

⁴ "Alexander Wetmore Oral History Transcript" (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Archives, April 18, 1974), p. 5.

C. Hart Merriam, Leonhard Stejneger, Robert Ridgway, Frederick C. Lincoln, Remington Kellogg, and Hartley H. T. Jackson. In 1911 Wetmore spent nearly a year studying the avifauna of Puerto Rico and nearby islands. In 1920 the United States signed a migratory bird treaty with Canada. This took Wetmore to South America, where he spent a year roaming from the Chaco in Paraguay to northern Patagonia, surveying wintering grounds of North American migrants. Nineteen twenty-three found Wetmore leading the *Tanager* expedition to the mid-Pacific, sponsored jointly by the Biological Survey and the Bernice P. Bishop Museum.

In 1924 Wetmore moved from the Biological Survey to the Smithsonian in order to become superintendent of its National Zoological Park. His stay at the National Zoo was brief, for he became the assistant secretary in charge of the National Museum in that same year. In that capacity he was responsible for overseeing the research and museum programs of the Institution in every field except solar radiation and astronomy, which were assigned to Charles G. Abbot. This change was significant for him and for the Smithsonian. Wetmore never pretended to enjoy administration. He admitted afterwards that he had always avoided administrative duty at the Biological Survey, either by leaving for the field or by sponsoring someone else for the post at issue. There are those who come to find administrative work interesting, an end in itself; to this group Wetmore clearly did not belong. Others become administrators reluctantly, never reconcile themselves to the work, and do it badly. Some, like Wetmore, do become reconciled and perform well. Wetmore's moment of choice, which he saw clearly as such, came with his 1924 shift to the Smithsonian. He believed the Smithsonian's way of doing business seemed least likely to hamper his research. Considering his continued scientific output, he judged rightly. Wetmore remained there for twenty-eight busy years,

retiring as its sixth secretary in 1952. During that time he accomplished a great deal, both as an administrator and as a researcher.⁵

Those of us who are responsible for administering scientific programs often feel confined by less than adequate resources to support research. Yet many of us, now accustomed to years of relative largesse from foundations and government, forget—if we ever knew—just how limited support for science was before World War II. Wetmore, on the other hand, lived his professional life with that reality. The work he took up in 1924 must have been exceptionally discouraging many times. Soon after his arrival the Institution began to plan for an increase in its capital funds, only to see that effort frustrated, first, by the death of Secretary Charles D. Walcott in 1927 and, second, by the onset of the Depression. To make matters worse, the Smithsonian was losing an older generation of able staff members like Ales Hrdlicka and Leonhard Stejneger, and it often lacked the means to compete effectively to replace them. Nor could it provide the level of support from technical and clerical staff that the Institution's programs required. Salaries were low, even in comparison with government departments like the Biological Survey. Physical facilities were also a problem, one with which Wetmore struggled throughout his career. Thanks to the Smithsonian's reputation and the support of its friends, its collections grew steadily. Thus the Institution, and especially the National Museum, faced a dilemma. On the one hand were its collections, which increased at a great rate over the years. On the other was a museum understaffed by underpaid workers, housed in inadequate space, and lacking properly funded support functions.⁶

Wetmore dealt with all these difficulties carefully and me-

⁵ "Wetmore oral history," pp. 3, 4, 9, 12.

⁶ "Wetmore oral history," pp. 24–25, 35.

thodically. Some may have felt he was too careful. A fairer evaluation reveals that he was agreeable to new ideas, but also mindful of the practical realities of the times. It was important to him that changes, when they occurred, should not violate the Smithsonian's reputation or appear frivolous. The first order of business was to obtain more money. The Institution, which had always stood in a special relation to the government because of its status as a trust establishment, had collected an assortment of functions that it performed, as reflected in the seven different annual federal appropriations. These lent a miscellaneous and unimpressive air to its presentations. Gradually, the Smithsonian developed a unified presentation aimed at a single appropriation from the government.⁷

At the same time the Institution took steps to revamp its administrative practices. The nineteenth-century system of chief clerks had lingered at the Smithsonian while other government offices reorganized themselves along more efficient lines. Wetmore brought in a specialist in federal budgetary procedures from the U.S. Bureau of the Budget, John Keddy. Keddy used his experience to make a more cogent case for funds and programs to the administration and the Congress. Subsequently Wetmore also brought in John Graf to aid in these reforms. Both later became assistant secretaries; but they are significant here for marking the Institution's turn, under Wetmore's direction, toward more professional management. Wetmore recognized the changing realities with which the Smithsonian must cope.

A special aspect of Wetmore's duties lay in the area of museum exhibits, and they presented something of a problem. The Smithsonian has always had a double function; that

⁷"Wetmore oral history," pp. 25-26. Frank A. Taylor oral history transcript, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Archives, February 27, 1974), pp. 83-85.

is, it supports original research and carries out an educational mission to the public, largely through its exhibits. It is not possible that all staff members will be equally interested or capable in both areas. Particularly in Wetmore's tenure, when resources were so thinly spread, the exhibit function suffered. Good exhibits that communicate effectively with viewers are astonishingly expensive, and there was little money to spend. In consequence, Smithsonian exhibits changed very slowly, and the Institution sometimes found itself outdistanced by other organizations' efforts. Finally, after World War II Wetmore, now secretary, approved plans for study and consultation on ways to improve and update the Institution's offerings. The process was necessarily a slow one, and major results did not appear until his successor's tenure, but the beginnings were made under Secretary Wetmore, whose insistence on quality was well repaid by the outcome.⁸

In 1946 Alexander Wetmore had been secretary for two years, and a member of the Smithsonian staff for twenty-two. While he had spent much time dealing with the Institution's problems, that year brought the Smithsonian a new bureau, the Canal Zone Biological Area, located in Panama (now called the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute). It was a great satisfaction to Wetmore to see this important center established under the Institution's banner; in a world now beginning to be aware of the importance of tropical ecosystems, his efforts must seem almost prescient. Still, old problems did not disappear for the Smithsonian. In 1945 Wetmore had urged introduction of a bill in Congress authorizing construction of a separate building for historical items; a building for engineering and industrial collections, including aviation; and more buildings for the National Zoo. None were approved at that time, but the need was clear to him all the same. In his annual report that year on the condition of

⁸ "Taylor oral history," pp. 85-87. "Wetmore oral history," pp. 46-48.

the Institution, he identified several other pressing needs: adequate space for staff, greater support for research, and a program to modernize exhibits. His slow, patient work, starting in circumstances more meager than most of us can recall, was to bear fruit in later years; but Wetmore's diligent, painful spadework lent an important impetus to the hopes of many for the Smithsonian's future. He took the measure of the times and exerted himself with patience and skill in the Smithsonian's behalf.⁹

PART II

From what we have already said of Wetmore's administrative activities, we might expect to find that his scholarly output had fallen off to accommodate the demands of managing the U.S. National Museum. Far from it! By 1964 his bibliography contained 708 entries. Of these, only 107 appeared before 1924, when he began his administrative labors. He began work on his magnum opus, *The Birds of Panama*, in 1944, the year of his appointment as secretary, and had produced three of its volumes by 1972, when failing health caused him to set it aside. Altogether, quite a remarkable record!

Alexander Wetmore was widely regarded as the dean of American ornithologists. He worked extensively in the field of avian paleontology and as a systematic specialist. For some sixty years Wetmore produced a stream of papers on fossil birds. With over 150 such entries, and almost as many new fossil taxa to his credit, he can certainly be said to have contributed more to his field than any other single person.¹⁰

Wetmore's most intensive work on fossil birds was done

⁹ *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for 1946* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1947), pp. 9-13.

¹⁰ S. Dillon Ripley, "Appreciation," in *Collected Papers in Avian Paleontology Honoring the Ninetieth Birthday of Alexander Wetmore*, *Smithsonian Contributions to Paleobiology*, vol. 27, ed. Storrs L. Olson (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), pp. vii, xi.

after excitement over the spectacular nineteenth-century discoveries of Mesozoic birds had faded, but before the rise of much modern interest in avian paleontology. Apart from the California school, he was for years almost the only student engaged in research on fossil birds. For this reason bird fossils from all parts of the United States, as well as such widely separated locales as Inner Mongolia and Bermuda, were continually referred to Wetmore's notice.¹¹

For years Wetmore diligently maintained a card catalogue of references from which he prepared three separate editions of a checklist of fossil birds of North America. He also prepared addresses, lectures, and entertaining synoptic papers designed to keep colleagues posted on current developments in avian paleontology. All this he did in addition to regularly producing many basic detailed descriptions and diagnoses of new forms.

Wetmore's first paper on fossil birds involved removing *Paleochenoides miocaenus* from the Anseriformes to the Pelecaniformes. R. W. Schufeldt, who had first described *Paleochenoides*, was not pleased by the younger man's action, but Wetmore's judgment was sound. Just recently the National Museum received specimens possibly representing two new species of *Paleochenoides*, and it seems that they may provide a breakthrough in our understanding of these seabirds. Wetmore's recognition of the true affinities of *Paleochenoides* was a first step in this undertaking.¹²

My own (S.D.R.) interests have long included the family of rails; and it was a large flightless rail, *Nesotrochis debooyi*, found in a Virgin Islands Indian midden, that provided Wetmore's first description of a new bird from osteological remains.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

Wetmore continued to give attention to the extinct Pleistocene birds of the West Indies, analyzing fossil avifaunas from Puerto Rico, Haiti, Cuba, and the Bahamas. Among his more striking discoveries was the giant Barn owl, *Tyto ostologa*, of Haiti, which he had diagnosed from a fragment of tarso-metatarsus. As late as 1959, Pierce Brodkorb, in dedicating a new fossil species of crow from New Providence Island to Alexander Wetmore, remarked that he was "responsible for all previous knowledge of fossil birds of the West Indies."¹⁴

Wetmore's chief paleontological efforts probably concerned the identification and description of Tertiary birds from North America, especially from the Eocene, Oligocene, and Miocene terrestrial deposits of the western states and the marine Miocene of the east coast. In these areas he laid the groundwork for all future research.

At one time Wetmore's work on the extensive Oligocene deposits of western North America stood almost alone and was correspondingly important to students of that material. But for Wetmore, some of the most interesting fossil deposits were those found nearest home—the Miocene marine beds of the Chesapeake Group. Most of what we know of the birds of these deposits is found in Wetmore's publications.

In 1939 Wetmore published a major paper concerning the Pleistocene avifauna of Florida that established the presence of several birds—like the California condor and the huge vulture *Teratornis*—then known only from the west, especially the Rancho La Brea Tarpits, in Florida. This paper opened a fertile field of investigation in which Wetmore has been followed by other scholars. In his many years of study of paleornithology, Wetmore was often asked to identify material from Pleistocene caves and from Indian middens, an often unrewarding study, but one he pursued steadily all the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

same. From such studies he published numerous notes showing that the distribution of many modern North American species was once far different than it is now. Together, these studies have made a significant contribution to our knowledge of the effects of Pleistocene climatic changes on avian distribution.¹⁵

These brief notes touch upon only a few of Alexander Wetmore's contributions to avian paleontology and their significance for present and future research; but perhaps they at least serve to suggest the skill and devotion he spent on this field across a professional lifetime.

Impressive as Alexander Wetmore's fossil studies are, his work as a systematic specialist is yet more so. His 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. At the time of his death he was trying to complete the fourth volume of his monographic study, "The Birds of the Republic of Panama" (*Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, 150). The volume of material he contributed to the National Museum is immense: some 26,058 skins from North America, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, the Hawaiian Islands, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, and Central America. Of skeletal and anatomical specimens, Wetmore prepared and contributed 4,363. The majority came from North America and Puerto Rico; but many are from Central and South America, especially Panama. Of eggs, Wetmore collected 201 clutches from North, Central, and South America. These collections may seem too large in retrospect, yet they form part of the basic resource on which present and future work depends. Today, specialists in taxonomic studies can appreciate the efforts of meticulous collectors like Wetmore, who gathered

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. xv, xvi.

sufficient representative material to require only highly specific additional collection.¹⁶

The number of species and subspecies Wetmore described is equally remarkable. From 1914 he described some 189 species and subspecies of recent birds new to science. Many of these are from central and northern southern America; but one finds significant representation from work in the Caribbean and in some of the Pacific islands. In the midst of all his collecting, Wetmore was wise enough to read the future, too, and became an early supporter of the Pan-American Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation. With T. Gilbert Pearson, Robert Cushman Murphy, Marshall McLean, William Vogt, Hoyes Lloyd, and Latin American colleagues, he joined in setting up the original organization.¹⁷

Over the years Wetmore's work involved him in many organizations. In addition to his membership in the Academy, he was a member of the American Philosophical Society; a director of the Gorgas Memorial Institute of Tropical and Preventive Medicine; a trustee of George Washington University; a trustee of the National Geographic Society, and a member and vice-chairman of its Committee for Research and Exploration. Wetmore was an active member of the American Ornithologists Union (Life Fellow, 1919) and served as its president (1926–1929) and its honorary president (1975–1978), the only person thus honored. In addition, he belonged to a number of clubs and social organizations, including the Washington Biologists' Field Club (1915–1978), the Cosmos Club (1925–1978), and the Explorers Club (1927–1978).¹⁸

Honors and awards came to Wetmore in great numbers.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. vii–viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

They included the Isidore Geoffroy St. Hilaire Medal of the *Societe Nationale d'Acclimation de France* (1927), the Otto Herman Medal of the Hungarian Ornithological Society (1931), the Brewster Medal (1959) and the Elliott Coues Award (1972) of the American Ornithologists Union, the Explorers Club Medal (1962), the Bartsch Award of the Audubon Naturalist Society (1964), and the Arthur A. Allen Medal of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (1970).

Gratifying as these honors were, it may be that Wetmore most appreciated the esteem of colleagues who remembered him in their own work—the colleagues who created for him what he called “my zoo.” Some 56 new genera, species, and subspecies of recent and fossil birds, insects, mammals, mollusks, and amphibians bear his name. The latest was a 1976 description of a new genus and species of fossil bird from Baja California, described by Pierce Brodkorb and referred to a new family (*Alexornithidae*) and new order (*Alexornithiformes*).¹⁹

PART III

Wetmore outlived most of his contemporaries, and there are now comparatively few who knew him except as a professional colleague. It seems only right that we should record something of his character here to color the portrait of the scientist-administrator.

Wetmore had married Fay Holloway in 1912, and they had one daughter, Margaret Fenwick Holland. Sadly, Mrs. Wetmore was very ill for many years before her death in 1953; this unhappy circumstance affected Wetmore deeply. This sadness probably added to a certain aloofness in his public manner. Nevertheless, to those who knew him well, Wetmore displayed a warmer, more human side. He was very

¹⁹ Paul H. Oehser, “In Memoriam: Alexander Wetmore,” *The Auk*, 97 (July 1980): 612.

fond of talking with the country people he met during his field trips. His amiability also proved useful when Wetmore wanted entry to private land to collect specimens. Landowners are often reluctant to permit strangers with guns on their property, especially if they own cattle. Wetmore was quite scrupulous in asking consent. Such was his skill, that he met with few refusals on his field trips. Of course, he was suitably discreet if he suspected he was on touchy ground—say, near a moonshiner's still. Yet his shrewd judgment was not always perfect. Watson Perrygo, an old friend and field colleague, reports that Wetmore was a perennial soft touch for loans at the Smithsonian, but not always a good judge of who would repay him.²⁰

Wetmore was quite meticulous in everything he did, and he expected the same of his colleagues. In the field he always wore a khaki uniform, complete with khaki tie. His friend Perrygo recalled that Wetmore expected the camp kit to be laid out with geometric precision, so much so that Wetmore preferred doing it himself. Perhaps his concern for order and efficiency helped make Wetmore the crack shot he was. Once, in dense cover, Wetmore and Perrygo sighted a bird they wanted for a specimen. The shot seemed doubtful to Perrygo and he called to Wetmore, "Did you hit him?," to which Wetmore replied, "I shot didn't I?"²¹

Wetmore was also a calm, matter-of-fact man. In 1920 his work on the then-new migratory bird treaty with Canada required him to spend some time in Argentina. Argentina had sympathized with the Central Powers in the war just ended. Feelings were still tense, and Wetmore was unsure of his reception. His approach was simply to appear and say, "Here are my papers; this is what I'm doing. What do you expect

²⁰ Watson M. Perrygo oral history transcript (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Archives, October 30, 1978), pp. 417, 427, 429.

²¹ "Perrygo oral history," pp. 407–9, 417, 441, 446, 517.

to do about it?" To this his hosts for the time being replied, "Nothing." So Wetmore replied, "Thank you very much," and lived more or less as he pleased.²² His calm appraisal of opportunities for study and learning became even more evident during one of his trips to Panama. Wetmore found himself the unwilling host to screw worm larvae, which had entered his leg, causing considerable pain. Yet, when polticing had finally extracted the larvae, he was careful to preserve them for use in our entomology collections.²³

Perhaps Secretary Wetmore's finest attribute was his absence of self-importance. His experience as an administrator had led him to believe that everyone reached a point in his career when he should step aside for other, fresher men and women to take up the work. He commented that he had seen the unfortunate results of clinging to a position too long, and he was resolved not to make that error. So it was that he resigned as our sixth secretary in 1952, ending a career of twenty-eight years at the Smithsonian. It is a real satisfaction for us to record this tribute in his memory.²⁴

A modest and gentle man of whom it could be said that he served all his responsibilities with conscience and humanity, Dr. Wetmore was never to lose his love of birds, and continued his active research program until his death at the age of ninety-two. A number of his uncompleted works, the fourth volume of his monumental *The Birds of the Republic of Panama* (Vol. I, 1965; Vol. II, Vol. III, 1972), for example, has been completed by Natural History Museum staff; also forthcoming are a number of uncompleted papers, which will be published collectively under the title *Wetmorea*.

²² "Wetmore oral history," p. 8.

²³ John Sherwood, "The Museum Life," *The Washington Star*, January 13, 1977, p. 82.

²⁴ "Wetmore oral history," p. 45.

IT IS WORTH RECORDING that the Smithsonian held a memorial service for Dr. Wetmore on December 18, 1978, in the Castle building. This service was in continuation of a tradition established with previous secretaries who had died in office. The service was attended by members of the Regents, the President of the National Academy of Sciences, and the Chairman of the National Geographic Society Board, with which cognate organizations Dr. Wetmore had been so closely associated. In connection with this service, it might be worth quoting part of the eulogy that was delivered at that time: "Through Dr. Wetmore's intervention in the Public Buildings Act of 1945, calling for museums of History, as well as Engineering, Industry, and Aviation to be built, the germs of two immensely popular buildings on the Mall at the present time were inculcated in the public mind. These were the Museums of History and Technology, completed in January 1964, and the National Air and Space Museum, completed in 1976. Such episodes remind one of the legislative birth pangs of what subsequently may come to fruition many years later"—in this case, more than twenty years. These episodes are characteristic of what has happened in the history of the Institution itself where the idea of creation often precedes by many years the fruition in the form of a new structure or a new discipline within the Smithsonian. We quote finally from the conclusion of that eulogy: "Alexander Wetmore will always be respected for his scientific contributions and loved for himself. He lived in the 'traditions of civility'. He has gone from us in the accomplishment of grace."

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