

LOUIS AGASSIZ FUERTES AND HIS CONNECTIONS WITH NEW YORK STATE

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Even the younger readers of *The Kingbird* have probably seen the odd name Louis Agassiz Fuertes: printed, as the title of a bird-preserve, a memorial room, a Boy Scout council; signed in the corner of illustrations of birds, in fat volumes of the *Birds of New York* or *Birds of Massachusetts* or *Birds of America*, in the Burgess bird or animal books, in old *National Geographic Magazines* (1914-1920) or *Bird-Lores*, and, if you are a serious student of ornithology, in one of many technical books, as for example Coues' *Key* (editions of 1903 and later.) I will suppose that you are curious about the name or that you have found in the pictures some 'speaking' likeness to the birds you yourself have seen. Perhaps you would like to know where you can find, for instance, the original, fresh—not printed—pictures. Well, if you are in New York City, go to the administration building of the Bronx Zoo; ask to see the large collection of life studies at the American Museum of Natural History. In Albany the State Museum displays the originals of the *Birds of New York* plates. Come to Ithaca and find the collection in the new Laboratory of Ornithology at Sapsucker Woods, and best of all, right now this summer, you may see a special exhibit of his studies, drawings and paintings gathered from many sources and displayed at the White Art Museum on the Cornell campus.

What were his qualifications to paint the birds of the state? Louis Fuertes was born in Ithaca in 1874 and lived here all his life. From the beginning he was close to the landscape. The herbarium specimens in his high school botany note-book (1892) are marked as from Six-mile Creek where students still go to collect wild flowers. His letters refer to boyhood tramping in the fields near Etna and among the Caroline hills after hawks' nests and chestnuts; he made later a detailed map of all the swimming holes in the many streams and gorges you could walk to from his house on the campus. He and his high school friends made skis to use on Buffalo Street for trips downtown and to Turkey Hill to the east. A paragraph in an 1894 sophomore English essay describes Indian summer above Cayuga Lake in terms that show his appreciation for this kind of New York State scenery. He is describing a drive taken by three students in a horse-drawn trap. As they passed "between the sombre brown fields and marsh lands, enlivened here and there by a vine of red bittersweet berries, or the crimson twigs of the swamp-alder, a soft blue-grey haze lay over the water, and the gently sloping points looked like long grey tongues." No birds got into this particular essay, but they were being looked at, listed, drawn and painted from his fourteenth year on.

The Hudson Valley at Scarborough was perhaps the second area of New York that Louis learned to know intimately. He picked hepaticas in the wet woods there in May of 1897 with the children of Abbott Thayer, with whom he later lived as a student of painting for several periods of many months each — some in the winter, when they had experiences with Redpolls and Crossbills, some in summer and fall, some in "May when the

wondrous warblers came" as Gerald Thayer wrote. They were keen after hawks and owls, and specialized in attracting owls by imitating their sounds.

In February 1901 Louis went alone into the Cornell Reserve in Franklin County in the Adirondacks to look at and collect the winter birds. Here his tramping was done on snow-shoes. His (unpublished) journal gives the feeling of the place:

Snow was very soft . . . and deep — with lots of buried spruce tops which invariably let you down and trip you . . . I heard a tapping that sounded three toe, and soon saw the author, a beauty black-back three toe, and after a short stalk he became mine . . . Had a fine snowshoe climb up rocky hill and got a good view from the top. Mt. Seward and Moose Mt. were splendid all day, and went out soft cold blue after having become from silvery white, towards evening, to first creamy, then bright golden orange, and finally soft rosy pink. Big cloud shadows kept the composition of the landscape continually changing by shifting the great blue and purple masses of dark.

Late in May of 1905 with William Maxon of the National Museum he combed Stockbridge West Hill south of Oneida for spring birds — saw eighty species, exclusive of water birds, and revelled in an unprecedented abundance of Cerulean Warblers. During this year he began painting for the State bird books. The shorebirds of the lakes and fresh-water marshes he learned from a canoe, a duck-blind, or a beach cottage on Cayuga Lake. He was the duck-hunting and studying companion during this time of E. H. Eaton of Geneva, author of *Birds of New York*, and the two ornithologists treasured the friendship of Foster Parker, a farmer who made his living near Cayuga on a cash crop of wild flag and wild ducks that he raised because he liked to see them around.

Louis' letters from a hunting visit with Senator Henry W. Sage at Long Point on Lake Erie show his enthusiasm for this kind of activity and place — which, though technically in Canada, is just over the line, and whose birds might very well be New Yorkers. In the early twenties he was a happy guest of Mr. Harry L. Ferguson each September for pheasant shooting and hawk-watching on Fishers Island beyond Montauk.

He always had some contacts with the city too. There were friends at the Bronx Zoo, and an exchange of services and kindnesses, and important business at the American Museum where Frank Chapman was curator of the department of birds. Louis went with him on many of his expeditions to collect materials for the habitat groups that form the Hall of North American birds and painted birds into the backgrounds of those exhibits. A.O.U. meetings were held in the city every few years; he never missed these if he could help it, and enjoyed besides special Museum occasions and Explorers' Club parties.

At one time or another he lectured or exhibited his paintings in most of the fair-to-large cities of the state, and had experience with the earth, the water, the wood, the air of many particular corners of it. About the birds that pass through on their way to breeding grounds or winter quarters, he

had this to say in an article on *Spring Birds* in the *Cornell Era* for April, 1912:

With the possible exception of the lower Hudson valley, there is not in the entire middle states a more advantageous station from which to study the spring migration than this Lake region, and Ithaca is the best point, being in an exceedingly diversified country and within easy reach of all possible conditions. Since the recession of the glaciers an additional feature has been added to the numerous attractions this region offers to birds, in the form of transverse ravines of varying depth. The fact that most of them are east and west in their course is of great importance, as their south banks never get the sun, and their north slopes are bathed in it and get all the shelter and radiation there is, with the result that they offer shelter and comfort to the early comers, while the cool, shaded south banks, where the ice hangs late, develop truly Canadian conditions, and attract the northern species, even inducing many to stay and breed well to the south of their normal nesting grounds. One needs only to stand on the foot-bridge over Fall Creek and compare the two sides of the ravine, noticing the preponderance of conifers and soft woods on the campus side and the oaks, ashes, chestnuts, elms and hickories on the north, to understand what havens these gorges are to the wandering birds of all classes. . . . Early in May begins the last and far most thrilling of the three waves [of migrating birds], when we may hope to see all the rare and unusual things. Now is the time to wake up. The bird to start things is the oriole. His loud, rich, 'plurp!' in the shade trees along South Avenue, a gay dash of orange and black; this is the sign to get out for a morning walk with a notebook, for Lord Baltimore is the official herald of the great pageant.

Any May you might have found Louis Fuertes looking into the gorge upon the backs of migrating warblers, hearing the 'plurp!' of the first oriole, crossing Thurston Avenue to put his glass on a scarlet tanager for one of the children to see. It was a lifetime of living in the Ithaca area — the center of central New York — that mainly qualified him as artist of its birds.
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LOUIS AGASSIZ FUERTES

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Nearly thirty years have passed since Louis Agassiz Fuertes painted his last picture. The last one, so far as known, was of two Abyssinian Turacos done for Miss Mary Young of Williamsport, Pa. on August 14, 1927. It now hangs in the Fuertes gallery of the new Research Center of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology. On the opposite wall hangs one of a Passenger Pigeon which he painted from a fresh specimen in 1889 when he was a high school boy of 15.

Fuertes' first published pictures appeared in Florence Merriam Bailey's *Birding On A Bronco* in 1896 and for the next thirty years his brush was