

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, THE GREAT NATURALIST

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It is fitting to pay tribute to the twenty-sixth president of the United States — Theodore Roosevelt — in this, the centennial year of his birth. This great man was born at 28 East 20th Street, New York City, October 27, 1858. Early in life he became interested in nature, was taken to Europe at 11 years of age and at 14 hunted along the Nile in Egypt, and also in Palestine. While there he became acquainted with numerous species which proved of assistance in identifying many birds in his 1909 visit to big game country in Africa.

In 1873 the family moved to Oyster Bay, Long Island, and Oyster Bay was his home, although occupied intermittently, and there he died. As a child he suffered asthma attacks which later he overcame through rugged outdoor living. Still puny at 17 he entered Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1876 and that summer made a trip into the Adirondacks to study birds. This Adirondack trip and subsequent ones furnished field work for his joint manuscript with Henry D. Minot, "Birds of the Adirondacks in Franklin County, N. Y." published in 1877. This has been a popular reference for visitors to the Adirondacks for more than three-quarters of a century.

This catalogue was written in the mountains and contains brief notes on 97 species of birds based on observations made in August 1874, August 1875, and June 22 to July 9, 1877. Young Roosevelt, only 15 years old on his first student visit, was principally responsible for the records. Mr. Minot, also a Harvard student, was with him only during the last week of June on the June 22 - July 9 visit. Minot's arrival in late June was highly prolific, however, compared to various August visits by Roosevelt among silent and moulting birds, and they thus acquired a better listing in this period. Roosevelt's and Minot's observations were made principally around the St. Regis Lakes.

Interesting are the old names given such as: Red-bellied Nuthatch for Red-breasted, Blue Yellow-backed for Parula Warbler, Orange-throated for Blackburnian Warbler, Canada Flycatcher for Canada Warbler, Bay-winged for Vesper Sparrow and Snow-bird for Junco, as well as others. His presumed to be breeding Tennessee Warbler has a question mark behind it and is probably a questionable record, although the Tennessee has been recorded as extremely rare in breeding season in Essex county with one or two records only. His locating the American Three-toed Woodpecker shows good perception and also his declaring it less common than the Arctic.

Young Roosevelt continued his education and graduated from Harvard in June, 1880. During the year before, March, 1879, after some collecting and observations, he wrote "Notes on Some of the Birds of Oyster Bay, Long Island". This pamphlet contains listings of 17 species and references to seven more. His description of the predatory habits of weasels after the Bob-white agrees with observations of this writer as he remarks: "The weasel is a bad foe of these birds. I have seen one track a covey across stubble fields like a dog and then creep cautiously up, pounce on one and kill it instantaneously."

He calls the Acadian Flycatcher (a non breeder for many years on Long Island) a rather common summer resident, frequenting dry, rather dense

woods and describes its notes very well. He also shot an Ipswich Sparrow and saw another on a sandy beach along the Sound. The two above discussed pamphlets appear to be the only important eastern ornithological writings of this famous author, although many of his books abound in natural history subjects.

Roosevelt devoted much of his early age to natural history in his college courses and these assisted him greatly by sharpening his powers of perception, reasoning and creative thinking. His visit in the west brought him in contact with rapid destruction of large game animals, such as the buffalo, and influenced him in later life while president when he became champion of sound conservation policies. Therefore, in his half century of strenuous activity, his interest in world life was never abandoned even though politics crowded in on him from time to time.

By the time he had entered Harvard at 17 he had collected and preserved specimens for which he founded a museum for his own use. He entered a "sparrow war" on the inimicable behavior to American birds of the English sparrow, which was a popular pastime while he was a sophomore, and on which he wrote several short articles. He taught a Sunday School class in a large Cambridge Episcopal Church for three years. In his third year he ranked thirteenth in his class, principally through excellent grades in two natural history subjects. His tremendous urge along these lines came to an end, at least temporarily, around his senior year as he became interested in political economy and metaphysics. His decision was probably influenced by the trend of the times to consider biology largely a science of microscope and dead specimens, perhaps influenced by the German Universities of that day.

His interest in ornithology waned during his senior year at Harvard, and a short while later he wrote "The Naval War of 1812", was married, became active in the National Guard and New York State Legislature. Around this time he gave the bulk of his museum (over 200 specimens) to the Smithsonian Institute.

After graduating, he spent much time in western United States, got out a few short field notes, and after his unsuccessful attempt to become Mayor of New York City in 1886, he wrote three books with many references to natural history. These were: "Hunting Trips of a Ranch Man", "Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail", and "The Wilderness Hunter". At this time Roosevelt was considering writing as a life work.

He was regarded as a hunter and naturalist with a peculiar admixture of each, was inimical to wanton killing and seeing it all around him, he became a proponent of conservation. The soothing panorama of prairie and high mountains helped him endure his grief following the death of his wife and mother the same day — February 14, 1884.

Roosevelt married Edith Kermit Carow — a life-long friend in 1886. He brought her to Sagamore Hill, Oyster Bay, which had been completed about 1885. Five children followed: Theodore, Jr., Kermit, Ethel, Archibald and Quentin.

From then on Roosevelt's life became largely political, although he had many controversial arguments with biologists regarding the value of field work versus laboratory research. He was appointed New York City Police Commissioner in 1895 and Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1897. He resigned

to become Lt. Colonel of the First Volunteer Cavalry which became the "Rough Riders" of the Spanish American War in 1898. In that year he was also elected Governor of New York State and in January, 1900, became Vice President. With the death of President McKinley in 1901, Roosevelt, at the age of 43, became President of the United States. From then to the end of his terms, March 4, 1909, records are studded with the creation of numerous wildlife sanctuaries, refuges, buffalo preserves, forestry schools and 51 bird reservations in 17 states and territories. This was accomplished besides starting the Roosevelt Dam in 1903, the Panama Canal in 1904 and a world-wide cruise of the fleet in 1907.

After the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt sailed on March 23, 1909 for a hunting trip to Africa and returned in 1910. He began a South American trip in 1913 and in late 1914 returned to New York after a 600 mile trip down the River of Doubt. Products of these trips were his excellent books "African Game Trails" and "Through the Brazilian Wilderness", published by Charles Scribner and Sons.

Sagamore Hill was a happy home for the President, his five children and their half-sister Alice (later Mrs. Nicholas Longworth). Although trips afield were not unusual and general outdoor sports were indulged in, yet there appears to have been no serious bird study or ornithological writings by the Colonel as in the days of his youth, even after he became ex-president. In fact, after a few years, storm clouds gathered over Europe — World War I became a reality and Roosevelt's four boys, now men, volunteered for service in France.

The father offered to raise a division of over-draft-age men for service overseas, but was turned down. He turned to writing patriotic speeches and articles. After a time came tragic news from the front. Archibald was wounded, Theodore was wounded and gassed and Quentin was killed. All this had a very telling effect on the Colonel.

The war was over and the Armistice signed. He and Mrs. Roosevelt looked forward soon to the return of the remaining three sons, but during an illness in early January, 1919, he fell asleep one night from which he didn't awaken. Just past 60 years of age he was buried in a little cemetery in Oyster Bay.

A fine tribute to this great naturalist was the naming, some years ago, of the magnificent Roosevelt Hall of the American Museum of Natural History in his honor. Also named after him is the Roosevelt Bird Sanctuary at Oyster Bay; and Sagamore Hill, his home for 35 years, is now a National Shrine. 3994 Park Avenue, Seaford, Long Island, New York.
