

WILSON AND AUDUBON

JOHN B. BELKNAP

These two eminent ornithologists, each of whom left behind a monumental work on North American birds, are associated with New York State only in a limited way. Since lengthy biographies have been written on both Wilson and Audubon, the following sketches are brief and relate principally to their activities in our state.

Alexander Wilson was born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1766. Achieving little success either as a poet or as a weaver in his native country he came to America in 1794 accompanied by a nephew, William Duncan. For several years Wilson supported himself mainly through school teaching. After coming to this country his interest in nature increased, and acquaintance with William Bartram proved to be an important turning point in his life. In 1802 Wilson was living near Philadelphia, not far from Bartram. Access to the Bartram library and friendship with the naturalist himself soon determined for him the work of gathering material for an "American Ornithology".

In the early 1800's Wilson made two walking trips through New York State. One, to the finger lakes region, had as its objective a visit to his sister, Mary Duncan, who was living near Ovid in Seneca County. The other, to Niagara Falls, was started late in the year and Wilson encountered severe weather before getting back to Pennsylvania. His poem "The Foresters" is based on this trip.

In 1808 the first volume of "American Ornithology" was printed and Wilson set out on a trip to obtain subscribers. He spent a week in New York City before making a circuit of New England. From Vermont he proceeded to Albany where he spent a few days. Despite indifferent success in selling his book, Wilson plunged ahead with the remaining volumes. During the next four years he completed six more and was well along with the next when death overtook him on August 23, 1813. His friend George Ord completed Volume Eight and went on to write the ninth and concluding volume. Wilson is buried in the Southwark section of Philadelphia.

John James Audubon was born at Les Cayes, Santa Domingo, now Haiti, on April 26, 1785. His boyhood was spent in Louisiana and in France. At the age of nineteen he came to "Mill Grove" in Pennsylvania. Two years later he was in New York City, working in the counting house of Benjamin Bakewell. During this period Audubon's spare time was spent in drawing and studying birds.

In 1807 he moved to Louisville and later to Henderson, Kentucky. His subsequent travels covered much of the United States east of the Mississippi. In August 1824 he was in Philadelphia and New York City, following which he went west via Niagara Falls and the Great Lakes. It is probable that this trip is responsible for the background of one of his drawings. Plate 331, the Common Merganser, shows Cohoes Falls, near the mouth of the Mohawk River.

It was during the last ten years of his life that Audubon's principal association with New York State occurred. In 1841 he bought a tract of land at Washington Heights, at that time a rural section of New York City.

The Following year he built a house at the foot of the bluff near the Hudson River, naming his estate "Minniesland". At this time he was working on the "Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America" in conjunction with John Bachman. Only the first volume was destined to appear during his lifetime. After 1846 Audubon's health and eyesight were poor. He died on January 27, 1851 and is buried in the cemetery surrounding the Chapel of the Intercession, not far from his home.

"Minniesland" was known for many years as "Audubon Park" but has disappeared due to the many changes that have taken place in this part of New York City.

Watertown, N. Y.

A CALL FOR PAPERS

On Saturday, May 21, there will be a Saturday afternoon program of short papers at the 1960 Annual Meeting of the Federation of the New York State Bird Clubs at Buffalo. Federation members are invited to participate.

At least one field trip to Canada has been planned. Members who were **not** born in the U. S. A. should bring the necessary papers concerning place of birth and any other pertinent information for presentation to the Canadian Immigration Officers.

Papers should be based on subjects relating to New York State ornithology or to problems affecting our Member Clubs which may be of interest to other Clubs. Talks, illustrated by slides or motion pictures, or with tape recording accompanying them, are usually very popular, but talks without such features will also be acceptable.

Members who wish to present papers at this meeting are requested to contact the writer at their earliest convenience, giving the subject, time desired, and what equipment will be needed.

H. D. Mitchell, Chairman Program Committee of Buffalo Meeting,
238 West Royal Parkway, Williamsville 21, N. Y.

FIELD NOTES

The Cattle Egret in New York State: The history of the Cattle Egret in New York State began in May 1954 when a bird of this species was seen at East Moriches, Long Island. Since that time others have been reported, more in 1959 than in any previous year, and further increases can confidently be predicted. Birdwatchers in New York State should be on the alert to observe and report occurrences of the Cattle Egret to their respective regional editors in order that this development may be fully documented.

Open pastureland is the preferred habitat, birds usually being found in close association with cattle. Look for a small stocky heron with a yellow or orange bill. The plumage is white, except for some buffiness on the head and back of the adult.

The Cattle Egret is a native of Africa, the warmer parts of Asia, and is also found in Spain and Portugal. During recent times a few birds reached South America, apparently crossing the Atlantic Ocean under their own power. Just when this event took place is not known, but the Cattle Egret had become established in northern South America by the 1930's. From there it spread to the West Indies and Florida, where it was found nesting in 1953.

It is a prolific, aggressive species and seems destined to spread rapidly in the United States. By 1959 it had been found breeding at widely scattered points in this country, including southern New Jersey. Its future as a breeder in New York State is uncertain, but nesting in the warmer parts of the state is a distinct possibility — John B. Belknap, 92 Clinton Street, Gouverneur.