

EDGAR ALEXANDER MEARNS

Edgar Alexander Mearns was one of several Army Medical Officers who were stationed in the west during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This group was responsible for much of the pioneer ornithological work west of the Mississippi. Mearns was also stationed in the Philippines where he engaged in natural history studies. Later he took part in two scientific expeditions to Africa. His association with New York State ornithology occurred principally in his youth.

Edgar Mearns was born at Highland Falls, N. Y. September 11, 1856 son of Alexander and Nancy (Carswell) Mearns. His interest in natural history began at an early age. He submitted articles and notes to the Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club (N. O. C.) beginning in 1877, and in 1878 presented a paper entitled, "The White Headed Eagle in the Hudson Highlands" at a meeting of the Linnaean Society of New York. This was the first communication read before that newly formed society. Mearns' contributions during this period related mainly to birds of the lower Hudson Valley. An article in the January 1879 issue of the N. O. C. Bulletin entitled "Notes of some of the Less Hardy Winter Residents in the Hudson River Valley", discusses twenty species including the Myrtle Warbler, which was noted as feeding on berries of the red cedar during the winter months.

His most important contribution to the ornithology of New York State was "A List of the Birds of the Hudson Highlands" which was published in installments in the Bulletin of the Essex (Mass.) Institute, 1878-1881. This is an annotated list of 213 species. Joel Asaph Allen, then editor of the N. O. C. Bulletin, in reviewing this, commented as follows: "His own notes, even when relating to some of our best known birds, are replete with new information attractively presented, few lists having appeared which offer so much that is really a contribution to the subject in a field where so little really new is to be looked for."

Mearns obtained his medical degree at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1881 and shortly thereafter was commissioned in the Medical Corps of the Army. He was stationed at Army posts in Arizona and Minnesota and later was detailed as medical officers and naturalist of the Mexican-U. S. International Boundary Commission. In the first decade of the twentieth century Mearns served two tours of duty in the Philippines. Specimens were collected and ornithological studies carried on wherever he went. On January 1, 1909 Mearns retired from active duty in order to accompany Theodore Roosevelt to Africa. Two years later he joined the Frick expedition to the same continent, during which five thousand bird specimens were collected.

Mearns died in Washington, D. C. on November 1, 1916. A more detailed account of his life and work will be found in "Ornithologists of the U. S. Army Medical Corps" by Col. E. E. Hume (1942). — J. B. Belknap, 92 Clinton Street, Gouverneur.