
JOHN GRAHAM BELL

On display at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology is a case containing 63 species of hummingbirds, many of them from Central and South America. This collection is a donation from John Warner Brown of Scottsville and Rochester whose great-great grandfather purchased the birds from a French collector more than a hundred years ago. Still extant is a receipt dated January 23, 1857 which reads: "Recd. of Mr. Warner 100 Humming Birds to be mounted and sent to Rochester on payment of \$100.00 JG Bell."

John Graham Bell, the New York City taxidermist who mounted the hummingbirds, played an unusual role in 19th century ornithology. A pioneer in the art of preparing and mounting bird and mammal specimens, Bell was probably the outstanding taxidermist in America during his active life. He was a friend and associate of the leading ornithologists of his day, including Audubon, Baird, Cassin, Giraud and LeConte. His life span covered the period of pioneer endeavor insofar as bird study in America is concerned. In 1812, the year of his birth, Wilson's "American Ornithology" was just seeing the light of day and much of the avifauna of North America was unknown. When Bell died in 1889 the first A.O.U. Checklist had been published and the United States boasted a small but dedicated group of ornithologists. By this time the west had been explored and its bird life fairly well studied and catalogued. That Bell himself was not an entire stranger to western United States will be seen later.

John Graham Bell was born on July 12, 1812 of a Rockland County family, members of which are still living in his old home of Sparkill. For many years he maintained a taxidermy shop on Broadway, New York City which was well known to the leading zoologists of the time. The esteem in which he was held is testified to by the fact that a number of species or subspecies of birds were named in his honor. The late Frank M. Chapman met Bell in the latter period of his life and describes him as "a tall, stately, white-haired, colonial type of man, then in his early seventies." Bell spent the last years of his life in semi-retirement in Rockland County, N. Y.

An eventful episode in the life of John Graham Bell relates to Audubon's famous Missouri River trip of 1843. Bell accompanied Audubon as an aide and collector, securing and preparing many of the new species which resulted from this expedition. A few years later he joined the 1849 gold rush, and, while in California found time to collect two new species of woodpeckers. The skins were sent to John Cassin in Philadelphia, who described them in the Proceedings of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Science (1850-51). Both are identified as having been collected about twelve miles from Sutter's Mill, El Dorado County, California. Bell died in Sparkill, Rockland County, N. Y., October 22, 1889.

John B. Belknap, 92 Clinton St., Gouverneur