

JAMES ELLSWORTH DE KAY

On a front page of a volume entitled Zoology of New York, or the New York Fauna, is this inscription:

To
WILLIAM C. BOUCK,
Governor of the State of New-York.
I submit a continuation of a Report on the Zoology of the State.
And have the honor to be,
With great respect,
Your obedient servant,
JAMES E. DE KAY.

In 1836 James E. De Kay had been intrusted with the stupendous task of covering "both botany and zoology" for a Natural History survey of New York State. The years of research that followed resulted in the publication of five volumes from 1842 to 1849. In these he had described more than 1,600 species of animals, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, molluscans, and crustaceans, introducing common names as far as possible

The introduction written in Volume I, Part I by William H. Seward, then Governor of New York, stated that "Altho the study of ornithology has not been pursued with the especial object of determining the species of birds indigenous to the State, still, in the comprehensive treatises which have issued from the press, there is no deficiency of information on that interesting subject." It was De Kay who organized much of this material in Volume I, Part II in 1843. He classified the birds into six orders which he called Accipitres, Passeres, Gallinae, Grallae, Lobipedes, and Natatores. It must be remembered that it was in the latter part of the nineteenth century that most of the fundamental work took place upon which our present knowledge of classification is based. In 1895 the A.O.U. Check-list had sixteen orders. Several species of birds well known at the present time were unknown to De Kay, such as the Alder (Traill's) flycatcher, Prairie horned lark, Rough-winged swallow, Migrant (Loggerhead) shrike, Louisiana water-thrush, Connecticut warbler, Hudsonian (Boreal) chickadee and Gray-checked thrush. However, the 1843 Volume had one hundred and forty-one plates showing three hundred and nine figures accompanied by descriptions. The artist, J. W. Hill, a lithographer of Endicott, N. Y., made the illustrations, usually of live birds, though of necessity some were done from specimens, carefully mounted by persons familiar with the habits of the living bird.

DeKay divided the State of New York into four districts: The Northern, The Hudson Valley, The Atlantic, and The Western. The Northern was bounded on the west by Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, on the eastern side by Lake Champlain and Lake George, and lying north of the Mohawk Valley. The chief growth of trees in this district was the spruce, pine, larch, balsam, fir and cedar. To quote the author: "It forms the southern limits of the migration of many arctic birds; and we accordingly meet here with the Canada jay and Spruce grouse, the Swan, the Raven and the Arctic woodpecker." The Hudson Valley district included counties watered

by the Hudson River and its tributaries, chief of which was the Mohawk, which after a course of about one hundred and forty miles enters the Hudson from the west, at a distance of one hundred and sixty miles from its entrance into the ocean. The Atlantic district comprised Long Island and again quoting De Kay: "It is remarkable for the abundance and variety of its birds. Here we find the extreme southern limits of the migrations of the arctic species, and the northernmost termination of the wanderings of the birds of the torrid zone. Thus, we find in winter in this district the Eider duck, the Little white goose, the Great cormorant, the Auk, and many others from the Arctic ocean. During the heats of summer, we meet with the Turkey buzzard and Swallow-tailed kite, the Fork-tailed flycatcher from the tropical wilds of Guiana, and numerous others from the south." The Western district consisted of the rest of the State's area to the west of the Northern and Hudson Valley districts. (To-day there are twelve regions of New York State listed by Drs. E. M. Reilly and Kenneth Parkes, and an additional one hundred and twenty species of birds.)

James Ellsworth De Kay was born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1792. He was the eldest son of George and Catherine (Colman) De Kay and a brother of Commodore George Colman De Kay. His father was an American Sea Captain who had lived in Lisbon for many years and had chosen a girl of Irish parentage for a wife. When James was two years old his family came to New York to live. He was only ten when his father died and fourteen when he lost his mother. The young teenager grew up in and near New York City. He attended a school in Connecticut but unfortunately its name and location have not been recorded. He was described as "early showing bookish proclivities and being a keen observer and student of nature." At nineteen he was a medical student, spending at least one summer at Guilford, Connecticut in reading to "fit himself" for that profession. However, Botany and Zoology attracted him more than medicine.

In his early twenties he became closely associated with a group of young writers in New York. Among them were William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper. Throughout his life his relationships with literary men seem to have been more intimate than those with physicians. He was a close friend of the poets, Fitz-Greene Halleck and Joseph Rodman Drake. De Kay was the first to read Halleck's tribute to Drake who was only twenty-five when he died. The poem has been referred to as one of the most exquisite epitaphs in the language, the first verse of which reads:

"Green to be the turf above thee,
Friend of my better days!
None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise."

In the spring of 1818 De Kay went to Europe where he studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and the next year took his degree there as a physician. He then returned to New York City and became interested in the Lyceum of Natural History which had been recently organized. De Kay edited the first two volumes of its transactions, acted as librarian, building up a collection of scientific books remarkable for its day, and helped in assembling a museum. He married Janet Eckford, daughter of Henry Eckford, an

American naval architect and ship builder in New York. Janet was also the sister of Drake's widow. They had three children, a son: James and two daughters: Marion and Janet. In order to work on his study of Natural History Dr. De Kay left New York City and established his permanent home, "The Locusts", a country place at Oyster Bay, Long Island, N. Y. His work was interrupted on the outbreak of cholera in New York City when he hastened to give his services to the afflicted although the practice of his profession was repugnant to him.

James E. De Kay was of a lively disposition and a great social favorite in New York. He would travel about, collecting facts and materials, from farmers, hunters, and fishermen, and contribute articles to the New York press. On November 21, 1851 Dr. De Kay died in Oyster Bay, just two months after the death of James Fenimore Cooper, his friend of many years standing.

The following recognition of De Kay's contribution to the knowledge of birds in New York State was written by the Director of the New York State Museum, John M. Clarke, in 1908:

"This State published — a comprehensive and finely illustrated treatise on the birds of the State prepared by the eminent ornithologist, James E. De Kay. Ever since its date of issue this work has been of fundamental value to all students of birds and may justly be regarded as, in a large degree, the primary inspiration of the present widespread interest among the people of the State in the science of ornithology."

Minnie B. Scotland, 42 Continental Ave., Cohoes 12047

NOTICES

Federation stationery is available to officers, committee chairmen, regional editors, etc. from our president.

Robert S. Arbib, Jr., 226 Guion Drive, Mamaroneck

HERONRY CENSUS

Mr. Walter E. Benning, R.D. #1, Clyde, N. Y. is undertaking a state-wide heronry census this year. He would be grateful for any information on the location of heronries, also if possible, a count of active nests.